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Caste in India

Diane P. Mines

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Front Cover: Grandfather and granddaughter with pencil box. Photograph courtesy of Richard Rapfogel.

Back Cover: Dalit men at home. Photograph courtesy of Richard Rapfogel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DIANE P. MINES is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She is the author of *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (2005). She has co-edited two books, *Everyday Life in South Asia* with Sarah Lamb (2002 with a second edition due in 2010), and the forthcoming *Do Villages Matter?* with co-editor Nicolas Yazgi (2010). She has conducted anthropological research in India for over twenty years and is currently studying South Indian concepts of landscape and environment. She received her PhD from the University of Chicago.

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Editor's Introduction

Although Asia is now in many ways (and certainly not for the first time) perhaps the world's most dynamic area, dysfunctional mental maps often inhibit rather than facilitate understanding of the region. Economic "miracles" notwithstanding, many people still conceptualize much of Asia as either possessive of a "timeless culture" or, more darkly, a place where there are few, if any, opportunities for mobility or a better life for average people.

Nowhere do often inaccurate stereotypes about Asian culture and institutions seem more prevalent than with perceptions of India—and the subject of caste is probably at the top of the "inaccurate stereotypes" list. Diane Mines' work constitutes a major advance in illumining readers about the realities of caste. This timely and unique booklet is a critical pedagogical tool that will assist instructors and students to better understand the history, complexity, fluidity, heterogeneity, and contemporary relevance of caste in the world's largest democracy. Diane manages to lucidly address various caste-related topics in a narrative that includes real-life examples from her own fieldwork that are nicely integrated into a broader, explanatory and well-organized narrative. Her prose is free of excessive technical jargon that younger (and older) readers who are not academics often find boring and confusing.

Diane is an anthropologist but from our first discussions concerning this project, she enthusiastically endorsed the notion that a "Key Issues" booklet on caste was needed to meet the needs of students and instructors in a variety of other fields including history, sociology, human geography, and political science. Readers should quickly discern from her prose that the booklet is not simply a narrow anthropological study but a broader treatment of the topic.

My special thanks to Diane, whose whole approach to the project made assisting her with its development most enjoyable. This booklet would also not have been possible without the helpful comments of Martha Selby, Joseph Elder, and Bruce Robinson. I am also deeply grateful to the AAS Editorial Board in general and to AAS Publications Manager, Jonathan Wilson, and AAS Publications Coordinator, Gudrun Patton, for their strong support of pedagogical scholarship projects such as "Key Issues in Asian Studies" and *Education About Asia*.

Lucien Ellington
Series Editor: Key Issues in Asian Studies

Introduction

I had been living in a small village in southern India for about a year when one day Aruna, a friend of mine from the village, showed me a large ledger book in which she had written down census data for everyone in the village. She had created this as part of her work as a nutritional health worker in the village. What a stroke of luck! I asked to see it. We sat down on my house stoop in the hot afternoon and thumbed through it together until, surprisingly, I found myself listed there: name, age, address, and *jati* (caste). *Jati* means "birth group" or, broadly, "genus"; humans in India are grouped into *jatis*, as are plants and animals. To what *jati* had I been assigned, I wondered? "Christian," she had written. I don't self-identify as a Christian, so I objected.

"My *jati* isn't Christian," I stated.

Aruna asked, "Oh, what is it?"

"I don't have one," I replied with a shrug.

Aruna dutifully erased Christian and wrote "doesn't have one," but as she did so her eyes smiled and then she shouted across the (very) narrow street to my elderly neighbor Parvathi who was idling away the hot day on her veranda talking to an even older neighbor. "Did you hear that?" Aruna shouted, "Diane doesn't have a *jati*!" Parvathi laughed out loud, leaning back and forth and hitting her hands on her knees as she did when particularly delighted. The old man offered a toothless chuckle. A few neighboring busybodies joined in. It turns out that claiming to have no *jati* is tantamount to claiming that you are no kind of thing in this universe at all!

And who was laughing together there on a sun-drenched dirt lane packed right and left with small whitewashed row houses? There was Aruna, a low-caste woman who worked on a World Bank nutritional project and whose husband cultivated a small plot of rice and bananas; Parvathi, my high-caste, landowning Brahman neighbor who was infamous in the village for still caring about caste purity rules even in an age when these were relaxing—she would not allow low-caste people in her home or take things directly from their hands; Arunacalampillai, an impoverished old farmer of high caste who was an expert teller of mythological stories; myself, of some indeterminate

foreign caste; and a few overhearing women of various castes sweeping the morning's dust from their houses back out onto the street.

What does it mean to be of one caste or another? How does one get to be of one caste or another? What difference does caste make to your life? Can you change caste? Would you want to? Is caste the same as class? Does caste determine your profession? Does it influence the shape of your social life or your political hopes? Do people even care about caste in these modern times? This booklet will address some of these questions. My aim is to begin to elucidate some of the complexities of the everyday life of caste in India today, from how caste relates to ideas of self and other to the social relations of agriculture in rural India, the history of Indian nationalism, issues of social justice, and Indian forms of democracy.

While this booklet is not a history of caste, it does acknowledge the importance of taking an historical approach to understanding what caste is in India today. To understand caste historically is to recognize that it has always been a changing reality. As Susan Bayly has written, caste cannot be seen as a timeless or essential feature of the Indian subcontinent but rather needs to be understood in relation to political and social history. Caste as we know it today, she argues in her book *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, has been shaped through political and social processes such as changing forms of kingship beginning in the seventeenth century through British colonial policy and the Indian independence movement (1999, 4). That is, caste as scholars studied it in the twentieth century is not what it was in the eighteenth or sixteenth century and so on. Nor is caste identical throughout India; it has different meanings and forms, and different histories, in different places.

Because caste today is related to national histories and the constitutional laws of nations, I have chosen to confine this text to India. But it is important to note that caste is hardly a phenomenon confined within the boundaries of modern India. Caste is a meaningful concept throughout South Asia, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Caste in Pakistan or Sri Lanka, however, has different meanings and relevance in social and political life than it does in India. It would be a mistake to treat them singularly. Neither are caste concepts confined to Hindus. As we will see, Christians, Muslims, Jains, and Sikhs in South Asia also make distinctions of caste.

Not only have colonialism, nationalism, and modern law affected the workings of caste in India. So have intellectual trends in academic studies of India influenced the way in which we think about caste and the questions we ask about it, and so this booklet will also offer some discussion of the way in which

various perspectives of scholars and policy makers have influenced our changing understanding of caste. For example, the first "ethnographic," or field, studies of caste were performed by employees of the British colonial government and as a result were strongly influenced by colonial interests. By the time academic anthropologists studied it, with their own agendas and assumptions, caste had already been altered in many ways by those same colonial interests. We need, then, to be aware of the fact that anthropology or any academic discipline gives us only partial understandings of this complex cultural phenomenon.

Before I begin to articulate some of the complexities of caste, one final caution is in order. Arjun Appadurai has written of the dangers of imprisoning any cultural or social area (e.g., India or the Mediterranean or Africa) within any single idea. Caste has often served as such a prison for India. That is, for many people India *is* caste and caste *is* India. But, as Appadurai points out, by labeling and identifying a whole region with a single prominent idea or institution, we erroneously presume fixed and fundamental, that is, "essential," differences between "East" and "West"; we "exoticize" others, making them foreign and different from our world and ways of thinking, as if there were no common ground; and we "totalize," that is, we turn one aspect of cultural life (caste) into the total character of a whole region (caste is India) (Appadurai 1988, 41).

What I hope to show, instead, is that to study caste means also to recognize that the some of the conditions from which it emerges and which it also shapes are conditions common to humans all over the world: a concern with power and rank, a sense of self in relation to others, the struggle we all face to matter in a world that doesn't always seem to facilitate everyone's mattering. Yes, caste requires a close look at local meanings and histories. But for all that, caste need not become an "othering" opportunity (India has it and we don't) but can rather become a portal for the human recognition that power and social difference condition cultural responses that we share with others: inequalities; desires for change; and feelings of worth and powerlessness, hope and hopelessness. Through a study of caste we can also learn to recognize that all humans are influenced by a social life that conditions and powerfully shapes not only our thoughts and feelings but also our sense of self, our relations with others, and our potential to act in the world.

Caste is one human mode of social differentiation. It is a mode of power, a mode of action, a mode of being and awareness, a mode of understanding and misunderstanding, a mode of caring. While caste may not be the lens we all use, most humans do in fact participate in some form of social differentiation and inequality; we may even make presumptions about the moral worth of others like or unlike us.

1

CASTE AND CULTIVATION I: MUTUALITY

Caste means more than one thing, and it means different things to different people. Its meaning has changed over time, too, and varies from place to place. In order to begin to grasp some of the many dimensions of caste, this booklet begins with one simple aspect, one that operates most obviously in rural areas where irrigation agriculture dominates subsistence activities: caste as a division of labor. From this partial beginning, each subsequent chapter will add a new aspect of caste in order to build up, bit by bit, a multifaceted set of ideas through which readers can view and begin to untangle the complexity of caste in India.

MUTUALITY

Studies in rural India in the first half of the twentieth century identified caste as a kind of division of labor for village communities. In 1936, William Wiser coined the term *jajmani system* to describe a pattern of nonmonetary, nonmarket exchange he found at work in a North Indian village named Karimpur. He found that the non-Brahman landholders (called *jajman*) in this village gave shares of their harvest, as well as cooked food and other goods, to members of occupational castes such as barbers, potters, priests, washermen, carpenters, and blacksmiths in return for long-term service. Wiser characterized these exchanges as "mutual" or "symmetrical": land-controlling castes and occupational service castes engaged in reciprocal exchanges of grain for service, an arrangement that apparently worked for the *mutual* benefit of all those involved.

Contemporary research confirms that such mutual exchanges persist in many agricultural settings today. However, some scholars have argued that these exchanges were not reciprocal and harmonious but exploitative and hierarchical. And historians have since argued that this early anthropological view of "caste as harmonious and self-sufficient village economic system" was inherited from and served to justify British colonial practices, distorting what

were the political realities of caste and villages. After outlining how mutuality works in Yanaimangalam, I will elaborate briefly on some of these criticisms.

YANAIMANGALAM

Yanaimangalam (a pseudonym) is one in a loose strand of villages set along the banks of the Tambraparni River in Tamilnadu, South India. The river flows west to east and slips finally into the Bay of Bengal but not before it floods and feeds the rice and banana fields that green Yanaimangalam for a good part of the year. Most village residents make a large part, if not all, of their living farming small plots of rice and, increasingly, bananas either as owners, tenants, or laborers. Yanaimangalam has existed as a settlement for hundreds of years—as evidenced by the six-hundred-year-old Visnu temple on the riverbank—and while the village's social organization and composition have changed over time in relation to transformations in political and economic forms—from kingship to colonialism to the modern democratic state and today's global economy—for all that time the mainstay of village subsistence has been rice cultivation. The rich irrigated lands of the village support two annual rice crops, and it is in the cultivation of rice that the "mutual" relations of caste are practiced most obviously. In rice agriculture, caste differences appear as a division of labor in which persons of different castes contribute differently to the production of rice and the maintenance of the cultivating life.



Fig. 1.1: A grandfather and grandson standing in their rice field.

To explain how caste relates to rice cultivation in Yanaimangalam, as it did to wheat cultivation in Karimpur, I need to set out some facts. Most of these data come from research I conducted intermittently in Yanaimangalam over a fifteen-year period, 1988–2003. Over this period, the village maintained a fairly steady population of about seventeen hundred persons, occupying around four hundred houses, and dispersed among five settlements. The largest of these settlements, often referred to simply as the Big Village, was home to about a thousand people snuggled into four streets and their connecting pathways. While it is no longer considered politic to do so, in the 1980s and 1990s each street was referred to by the name of the caste that predominated on it. The northernmost street was called the Agraharam (fig. 1.2), a term that denotes a neighborhood of Brahmans. To the south came Pillaimar Street, then Muppanar Street, and finally Thevarmar Street. These names are those of the more powerful, landowning castes in the village. On the edges of Thevarmar Street, and abutting the fields beyond, lived a handful of families from a variety of castes named for the hereditary service work that they had the right to perform in the village, including washerman, barber, blacksmith, carpenter, and temple musician. Families of other service castes, such as potters and garland makers did not live in Yanaimangalam but commuted by foot or bicycle from nearby villages to work for village families. These commuters include a barber, for all three adult male barbers in Yanaimangalam made their living doing other work; one was a shopkeeper, one a tailor, and one an assistant to the district engineer. Some older landowners told me that in their younger days members of even more service castes resided and worked in Yanaimangalam, including an oil presser and goldsmith. Table 1.1 shows population figures for 1990. While in no way can one assert that caste determines occupation, a small number of families do pursue caste-based occupations, something they view as their hereditary right in certain villages or, in urban areas, for certain families.

Table 1.1: Castes in Yanaimangalam, 1990

Caste Name	Main Occupation	Population
Thevar	Dominant landowners	495
S.C. Pallar	Predominantly laborers	422
Pillai	Dominant landowners	295
Muppanar	Dominant landowners	208
S.C. Paraiyar	Predominantly laborers	145
Illuttupillai	Small landowners, millworkers	82
Brahman	Small landowners, priests, teachers	47
Carpenter	Carpenters	18
Blacksmith	Smiths	14
Barber	Shop owners, tailors, professionals	22
Saiva Pillai	Small landowners, accountants	13
Washerman	Washermen	13
Naidu	Merchants (retired)	4
Muslim	Merchants	4
Kambar	Priests, musicians (retired)	1

Note: Most families, of all castes, also have members who work outside the village in various jobs and professions.



Fig. 1.2: Agraharam street, 2003. (©Richard Rapfogel, used with permission.)

Yanaimangalam's other settlements, scattered at some distance from one another across the fields, were smaller hamlets in which mostly the lowest-ranking castes resided. Three of the hamlets were occupied by S.C. (Scheduled Castes), a contemporary euphemism for what the British, when they ruled India, called "Untouchables." The fourth hamlet was occupied by Illuttupillai, a caste locally considered quite low and said by some to have originally been toddy tappers (those who climb palm trees and tap the fruit for its juice). They deny this, claiming more status than they are accorded in Yanaimangalam. One person I interviewed pointed out how in a mill town just twenty miles away her caste was more numerous and powerful than all the others and her



Fig. 1.3: An S.C. (Untouchable) hamlet during a festival, 1990.

uncle the head of the workers' union. Most S.C. worked as tenants or laborers in the fields of landowners residing in the Big Village, though many younger people from these communities have migrated to cities and towns to pursue an education or other jobs, often unskilled factory or construction labor.

One of the questions I pursued during my research was whether or not the arrangement that Wiser described as "mutuality" operated in Yanaimangalam. Did landowning castes dole out shares of their rice harvest in return for the service of occupational castes? Was the village "self-sufficient" in this way? To the first question, the answer is a qualified yes. Some elements of nonmonetary exchange between castes engaged in labor surrounding rice cultivation continue to exist in Yanaimangalam, but not everyone participates in them. It works like this.

Rice agriculture requires a great deal of labor from basic maintenance of irrigation channels and field boundaries to plowing, fertilizing, irrigating, pumping, planting, transplanting, weeding, applying insecticides, guarding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, measuring, bagging, loading, and transporting grain to market. It also requires equipment: plows, draft animals, harnesses, sickles, ropes, shovels, brooms, winnowing baskets, pots for storage, wagons, wagon wheels, measuring implements, burlap bags, and so on. While more and more farmers rent tractors and threshing machines to aid production, many still rely on, and claim to prefer, older methods and tools. Very few farmers own tractors; in 2003 I noticed only one tractor in the whole village.

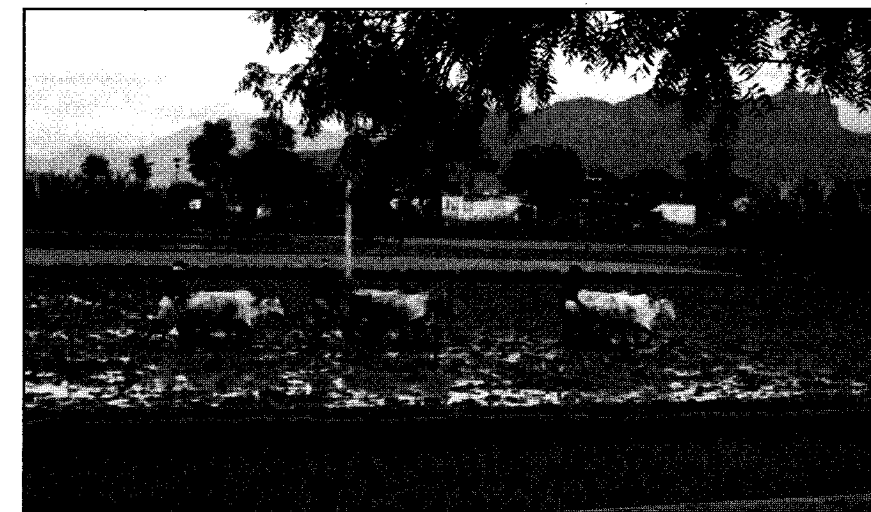


Fig. 1.4: Plowing a field with oxen.



Fig. 1.5: S.C. laborers transplant rice with the landlord (carrying the umbrella) and an overseer.

Landowners rely on the labor of others to complete the work necessary for planting and harvesting grain. In return for their "service" to the landowners, these workers receive agreed-upon "shares" of the harvest. While nowadays a farmer can go to town to purchase supplies and hire laborers for a cash wage, in fact the mutual economic exchanges between castes in the village persist, perhaps in some places more than in others.[1] It is important to note that occupational castes in Yanaimangalam are families that have certain hereditary rights to perform their jobs. As long as these rights are recognized, and as long as the families fulfill their occupational responsibilities (including skilled and ritual labor), most landowners continue to rely on this source of local skilled labor. Such rights often go back many generations. Some are engraved in stone on temple walls (in brief formulas such as "so and so's family has the right to perform such and such a service to the temple" signed by the local chief or king). Other rights are inscribed on the land. For example, potters from a neighboring village have the right to farm a small field in Yanaimangalam. As long as they keep making pots, bricks, and terracotta deity statues for local temples, they can also keep the produce from that field. New rights may be granted still by a committee of leading landowners. These rights, under certain circumstances, are recognized by courts of law in India today, although, as in any court system, it is not always easy to win cases against more powerful interests.

Yanaimangalam's blacksmith family has a hereditary right to make metal plow tips, shoe draft animals, and apply metal rims to the wheels on the wooden oxcarts used to transport grain. The local family of carpenters has the right to make and maintain all the wooden tools used in agriculture, especially plows

and carts. Priests, both Brahman and non-Brahman, have a right to perform rituals required by the dominant, land-controlling castes. Washermen wash clothes, barbers cut hair, metalworkers repair metal storage containers and cooking pots, and potters make clay ones. Many of these hereditary service castes also perform ritual services for the landowners, a topic I will broach in chapter 2. So-called Untouchable castes perform the bulk of field labor and receive a cash wage in addition to customary shares of grain. Untouchables have fewer hereditary rights, and in the past some served as bonded laborers—indentured servants—to their landlords. However, as free laborers today they continue to claim rights to receive certain shares of grain. In Yanaimangalam these include "paddy for beating," which is a share of paddy (threshed but unhusked rice) from the grain heap in an amount intended to feed one family for one day, and "a bundle of grain," which is a daily portion of harvested grain still on the stalk, the amount that one laborer can carry in one bundle on his or her head.

At harvest time in Yanaimangalam the anthropologist is faced with an almost ideal typical image of mutuality. The landowner sits beside a huge pile of paddy heaped in the middle of a harvested field or "threshing floor." He directs workers to measure out shares of this bounty to all those who participated in its production: a share for the blacksmith, the carpenter, the potter, the barber, the washerman, the priest, the garland maker who provides flowers for rituals for the gods and the beautification of women every morning, the landless laborers who harvest the grain and thresh it, and so on. It seems as if the whole village cooperates to produce rice and the rice feeds the whole village in return, just like the self-sufficient and harmonious village that Wiser's ethnography depicted. But is the village in fact self-sufficient? Was it ever?



Fig. 1.6: A landlord with a grain heap and measuring implement (left). Untouchable laborers are winnowing.

DEBATES

Despite the presence of such scenes played out on threshing floors during harvests across many parts of India, many critics and scholars have noted the danger in some of the more idyllic depictions of such exchanges, arguing against the view that such arrangements are equitable and harmonious and, just as vigorously, opposing the view of Indian villages as economically self-sufficient.

Some villagers do consider their exchanges of service for grain to be mutual and equitable. Yet, as Pauline Kolenda has summarized, several researchers took issue with Wiser's characterization of these relations as mutual and saw them rather as coercive and inequitable. Harold Gould (1958) and Thomas O. Beidelman (1959), for example, correctly viewed landholding castes as politically and economically powerful groups with privileged access to the food supply. As the "dominant" castes in their villages, these landholders also controlled all exchanges. Today dominant landowners, as was the case earlier with local chiefs and kings, make the political decisions that affect all villagers. It is they who have the power to grant or withhold hereditary rights and assert control over the rights and bodies of some service castes as well as "Untouchables." And they have the power to resort to violence to achieve their ends.

Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar illustrate how such power operated in the northeastern state of Rajasthan during the time of kings, that is, prior to Indian independence (1947) when minor kings retained local powers under colonial rule. The oral histories of villagers residing in what was the little kingdom of Sarwar in Rajasthan described some of the ways the king exploited the labor of villagers based partly on their hereditary caste duties. They described the system of *begar*, forced labor, in which the king and his men had the power to command subjects' labor for no pay (Gold and Gujar 2002, 75). Barbers, potters, Untouchables, and even Brahmans and other higher castes were forced into service. One informant described how the barbers had to wash dishes and light lamps, potters had to carry water, and Untouchable women had to grind grain to feed the king's horses. To feed themselves these women sorted grains from cow dung, grains they would wash, grind, and eat (151–53).

While these villagers now describe themselves as free from such forced labor, there are other cases in India today that show how locally dominant landlords continue to control the labor of hereditary village servants, most often by refusing to pay them for their services or by firing them from their work. Bettina Weiz (2010) describes the Untouchable Varadan, who performs the hereditary service of managing the flow of irrigation water in a village. To be paid for his service he must go from threshing floor to threshing floor, hoping to be paid. He is abused by his employers verbally and physically, and one farmer who had not paid him for two years declares outright that "Varadan does free service." In Yanaimangalam, one elderly woman recalled for me how her family had lost its rights to perform service for the village's goddess temple when the landowners decided to take over her allotted field in order to expand the temple. They had no problem dispensing with her rights.[2]

Second, many older accounts of the "*jajmani* system" seem to suggest that villages were relatively self-sufficient and bounded units; they grew their grain and shared the bounty to sustain their small community. But this was almost certainly never the case. Any student of Indian village life would do well to heed C. J. Fuller's warning (1989) about the danger of treating the village exchange nexus as a closed system of any kind. Where *jajmani*-type relations existed, and they did not exist everywhere, they were always part of wider relations in political-economic systems of patronage, kingship, and trade. Local peasants living in villages have been tied to state systems of taxation and redistribution and continue to be linked to the banking system; the global economy, including international trade; and modernizing agricultural techniques, including genetically engineered seed from the Monsanto Company. Villagers have been integrated into larger polities through networks of exchange, labor, military service, migration, education, travel, and all the other myriad ways in which members of states continue to be connected to wider networks of power and economy. They take out bank loans, rely on government distributions of fertilizer and irrigation water, and supplement their incomes with work outside the village. They or their children teach or work in factories, for the government, or as computer programmers. They migrate to the cities to be educated or work as mechanics or bus conductors in neighboring towns. All the various jobs and careers you might imagine for yourself are part and parcel of village life and economy.

The myth, we may now call it, of the self-sufficient, harmonious Indian village was not only first produced by but also played into the hands of British colonial policy makers. It even provided a rationale for British rule. Nineteenth-century colonial writers such as Henry Maine, Sir Charles Metcalf, and B.H. Baden-Powell portrayed India as a land of self-sufficient, harmonious villages with all castes working together to make the whole. British depictions posited that India was an unchanging, ancient land of autonomous villages that had survived wave after wave of external tyrannical rule. But, as Ron Inden writes, the colonial view of India as a "land of villages" served to "deconstitute the

Indian state" by dismissing any idea that India produced its own complex polities and histories of which villages were part (1990, 132–33). British rule could be constructed as beneficent because it preserved the allegedly harmonious nature of Indian village life. Because they claimed that "the real India was in the village, the British found it possible to claim, too, that their rule was a form of protection" (Cohn 1987, 103).

So, while we cannot claim India to be a land of isolated villages, each its own "republic" and each granted some internal autonomy, what we can say with confidence is that in the early twenty-first century many Indian rural cultivators do engage in mutual exchanges of grain for service and they organize these exchanges using the language of caste difference. This, however, hardly exhausts the multiple meanings of caste in India.

SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CASTE IN INDIA

Caste Determines Occupation

There is no way that most castes in India can be or could ever have been matched with occupations. There are thousands of *jatis* in India. In comparison, standard lists of occupational service castes are small. There are a mere eighteen recognized service castes in South India: washerman, barber, potter, goldsmith, metalsmith, stonecutter, blacksmith, carpenter, oil presser, salt merchant, betel-leaf vendor, village guardian, garland maker, drummer, cowherd, sacrificer to the goddess, hunter, and tailor (*Tamil Lexicon,* vol. 2, 970). So, while most castes are in no way linked to occupation, what is true is that some families of service castes such as these have had hereditary "rights" to serve in those capacities in certain localities. But nothing says they must engage in that profession. If they choose not to, a family will lose its hereditary rights, which will be assigned to another family. Today most young people from the limited number of service castes, with encouragement from their families, aspire to move into more lucrative professions and have careers that are not tied to seemingly old-fashioned peasant modes of subsistence based on caste occupations.

On the other side of the coin, it is also crucial to note that most work in India today is not tied to caste in the least. There is no lawyer or mechanic or farmer caste. Anyone can be a teacher, Internet technology specialist, lawyer, farmer, banker, factory worker, doctor, mechanic, or business owner.

Caste is a Term that is Used Only in India

Caste is derived from a Portuguese term meaning "color." The phrase "*sistemas de castas*" was widely used in the Spanish colonies of the Americas to refer to

the different categories of people under the colonial government and their ranking relative to ideas of nobility: Spaniards, those of mixed descent, indigenous peoples, and those of African descent. In Sanskrit, the term *varna* also means "color" and refers to the textual division of persons into four categories: Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. These names are still used by many Indians to designate their general place in a caste-defined society. *Jati*, a pan-Indian term meaning birth group or genus, is the common term for what we think of as caste. A person inherits *jati* from their parents. Of these there are thousands.

2

CASTE AND CULTIVATION II: CENTRALITY

In chapter 1 we saw that some of the first anthropological models posited that caste was primarily a division of labor based on a form of nonmonetary, nonmarket agricultural exchange. In the 1980s, the anthropologist Gloria Raheja revisited rural intercaste exchanges in a series of articles and a book called *The Poison in the Gift*. She developed a comprehensive model to explain the many meanings of intercaste exchanges among residents of a village in North India called Pahansu. She found that village residents did talk about their exchanges in terms similar to those outlined by Wiser: the dominant landowning families gave grain in return for services provided by families of hereditary occupational service castes such as washermen, barbers, and Brahman priests. Villagers talked about these as reciprocal and symmetrical exchanges of service for grain. However, as Raheja found, these reciprocal exchanges were only one of three aspects of exchanges that villagers stressed. The other two aspects she called "centrality" and "rank." Figure 2.1 represents these three aspects of exchange.[1]

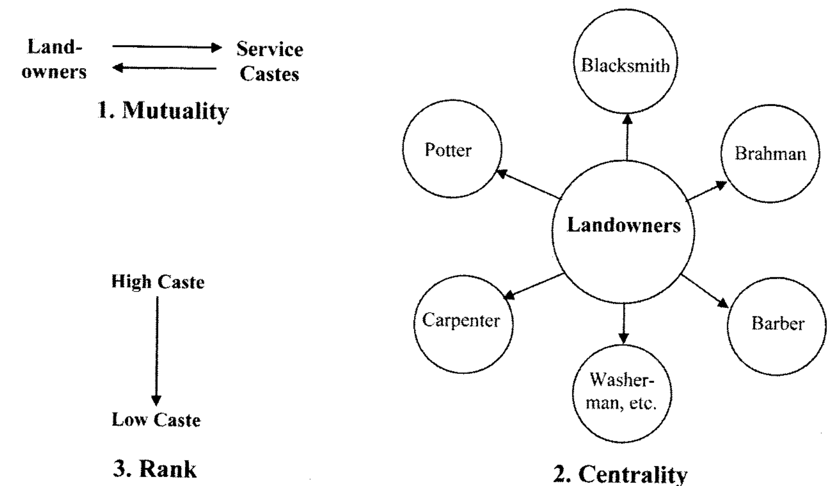


Fig. 2.1: Three aspects of exchange: mutuality, centrality, and rank. (Adapted from Raheja, 1988a, 243.)

In this chapter, I examine centrality, the process whereby powerful landowners reproduce their dominant political and social position at the "center" of a system of redistribution. Unlike a redistributive model based solely on economic value, this distribution is also a political and ritual distribution. The dominant landowners (from the Gujar caste in the case of Pahansu) distribute not only grain and other goods but also what Raheja terms their "inauspiciousness" (their sins, faults, and even impurities) in customary payments to members of other castes in the village, including those very same service castes we met in chapter 1, especially barbers, washermen, and Brahmans, all of whom are said to be capable of digesting their patron's inauspiciousness without endangering themselves (1988a, 201–2). The regular movement of sin and other kinds of inauspiciousness is necessary not only to the well-being of the landowners but to that of the whole village.

The Materiality and Biomorality of Action

To begin to grasp the complex workings of centrality where caste is an organization for the ritual transfer of inauspiciousness, we need to first understand some Hindu moral concepts, especially the concept of action (karma). Many Hindus understand their actions, whether meritorious or sinful, to have material consequences for their bodies. Actions, they say, may endure or "stick" as material traces to the bodies of those who perform the action (actors) and/or to their descendants. It is important here to understand that these action traces are not merely mental (as, say, we might think of a memory) but are understood by Indians to be material, actually embodied in the actor.

For example, two children—a brother and sister—living in one of Yanaimangalam's hamlets had fairly serious physical disabilities. The brother had contracted polio as a young child and as a consequence walked with a pronounced limp. The sister had lost an eye due to infection, and her glass replacement was painful and often infected. Their parents, whom I interviewed, attributed their misfortune to an act of the children's grandfather, who had committed a murder in his younger days before they were born. The grandfather was in prison, but the grandchildren were thought to have inherited the material traces of the act. Their bodies carried the negative moral "fruit" of their grandfather's action and suffered them as physical problems.

Because of the embodied nature of action, some scholars refer to Hindu moral actions as "biomoral," partaking of both morality and biology.[2] Meritorious actions (called in Sanskrit *punya*) are said to contribute to moral orders and to ensure for both society and persons a clear, unobstructed path to the future, including positive outcomes in practical matters such as crops, exams, employment, and marriages. Conversely, immoral or sinful actions (*pap*) contribute to disorder and hinder positive outcomes.

To reiterate, actions cause *material* traces in actors. These material traces are potentially removable and transferable. Raheja found that villagers used intercaste exchanges to effect such transfers. Through her close analysis of exchanges in Pahansu, Raheja found that the powerful, landowning Gujars disposed of their sins and faults through exchanges with members of the occupational service castes, including Brahman priests. They accomplished this disposal through a kind of exchange called *dan* (this word derives from the same root as the English terms *donor* and *donation*). These "peripheral" villagers accepted the Gujars' inauspiciousness—their faults and sins—in part because they were able to and in part because they had to. They had to because it was one of their responsibilities as members of hereditary service castes. Further, Raheja found villagers to reason that if the central landowners were to succeed in growing the food that they distribute at harvest, food that the whole village eats, then these landlords must be relatively free of incapacitating karmic substances.[3] I found a similar discourse to be common in Yanaimangalam. Landowners there, too, sent out their sins and other kinds of faults, especially the so-called evil eye, to hereditary service castes through customary gifts and payments of various sorts.

Transferring Sins and Other Negatives in Yanaimangalam

In Yanaimangalam people often link their bodily and social incapacities to past actions or events. Sometimes these are sins they have committed, and sometimes they are the sins of others. For example, one women, fearing for her brother, explained that all males in her family die before marriage. She attributed this outcome to a murder for which her grandfather was partly responsible. As in the example of the children with chronic health problems, here a biomoral sin was passed down in the family as if it were genetic material. While murders are grave sins, smaller acts such as inadvertently killing an animal, say, in the course of one's plowing a field or even plain stinginess or meanness are sins that can stick to one's body and soul. And sins are not the only negative materials that stick to persons. In Yanaimangalam, the so-called evil eye (understood as the emotional energy of persons who may have intense feelings of envy, anger, or even love toward another person) is a common, everyday negative that is thought to hinder positive action in its recipients. Negative biomoral substances are a part of everyday life. But, whether it is a sin inherited from the evil actions of one's predecessors or the everyday effects of the evil eye, the material traces of actions can be potentially removed

and disposed of. It is especially important to try to remove these hindering qualities prior to participating in significant events such as weddings, puberty rituals, or deaths. But sometimes people who feel burdened by the evil eye or another fault may conduct small daily household rituals to rid themselves of it. While agriculture is one venue where sins hinder productivity, this phenomenon is present in urban areas as well, affecting persons in all life stages and professions.

Sometimes Hindus dispose of sins and other kinds of faults such as the evil eye through a two-stage spatio-temporal process. First the evil or fault is removed from the person and transferred to some object (often a foodstuff). Second, the object is removed from the person's environment and in this way discarded.[4] In Yanaimangalam, the first stage is commonly accomplished in either one of two ways: through the circular motion of the object around the afflicted person, a motion intended to separate the sin from the person and transfer it to the object; or through the recitation of mantras, powerful words that are believed to effect the transfer from person to object. The second phase, removal and disposal, is accomplished again in either one of two ways. The object may be simply tossed out, like refuse, in some exterior place such as a field, crossroad, or threshold (fig. 2.2). Or it may be given as a customary payment to some specific person who accepts the object and takes it away from the donor. Often the recipients of such objects are the priests who perform the rituals or they may be members of other service castes such as washerman, barber, or potter. Sometimes Hindu deities in temples will take on the sins of their devotees.[5]



Fig. 2.2: A young woman disposes of the evil eye at a Brahman puberty ritual.

The first time I heard sin discussed in these terms in Yanaimangalam was when I attended a funerary ritual. This ritual, the first anniversary of a woman's death, was held at the house of one of Yanaimangalam's "central" landowners, Arumugam Pillaimar, for the sake of his deceased wife. For two hours, two Brahman priests sat cross-legged on the landowner's small, red-tiled floor reciting Sanskrit mantras. As they recited, they piled many food items, one after another, onto a set of large banana leaves laid out in front of them. The mantras in this case were intended to effect several transformations, chief among these being the creation of a "subtle body" for the deceased to use on her journey to the realm of the ancestors. Eventually, the woman's sons were sent to the river to release this subtle body, made of rice balls, on its journey. As soon as they left the house, the priests rather unceremoniously pulled out a few cloth bags and loaded them with all of the uncooked foodstuffs laid out before them, including rice, several kinds of lentils, numerous vegetables, unripe fruits, and sugarcane, along with some coins. Then they went home, taking with them the loaded bags.



Fig. 2.3a: A barber cuts hair at young boy's "first haircut" ritual.



Fig. 2.3b: A goldsmith pierces the boy's ears.

I asked the landowner why the priests took all the offerings with them. He replied, "That's for eating the sins. That way, the sins will go. It's a kind of *dan*." Then he added that the priests would take the goods home, where they would cook and eat the food, thereby consuming and "digesting" his wife's sins. This elaborate ritual was intended not only to create the subtle body but also to remove finally any sins that were clinging to her soul and thereby clear her path to the afterlife. As my research progressed over the next two years, I found that in many contexts, but especially during life-cycle rituals such as weddings, puberty ceremonies, naming ceremonies, first ear-piercings, births, and funerals, village servants—especially Brahmans, barbers, and washermen but others as well—were regularly expected to accept gifts and payments that effected the removal of sins and other faults from those undergoing the ritual. Figure 2.4, for example, shows a wedding ritual in which the evil eye is transferred from the groom to a coconut and a plate of unhusked rice. This food, I was informed, was later given to a barber.

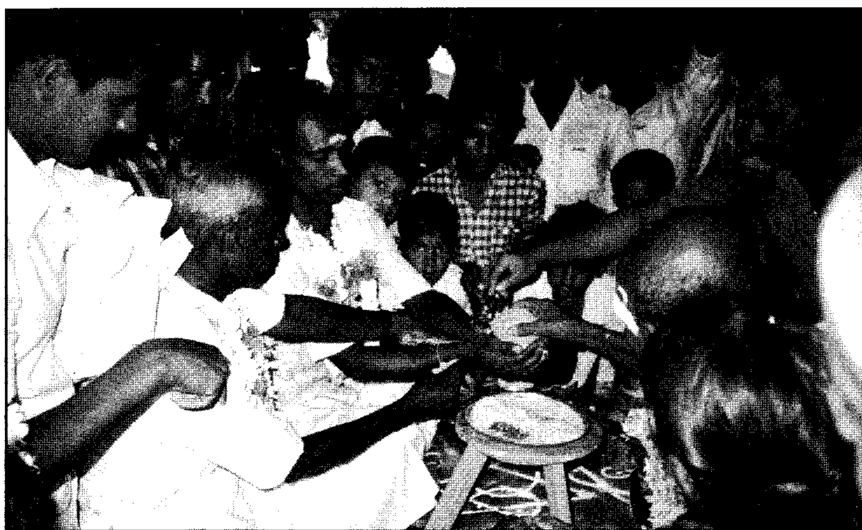


Fig. 2.4: Transferring the evil eye to a coconut and unhusked rice to give to the family barber.

Why Take On Someone Else's Sins?

Students often ask me why anyone would accept a sin-laden object. This question arises especially after I tell them about the potential side effects of accepting the sins of others such as those described in Jonathan Parry's ethnographic study of Brahman funeral priests in Banaras. Parry details how the *dan* that mourners gave to funeral priests were explicitly intended to transfer sins from the deceased to the priest. The Brahman priest, ideally, ought to be able to rid himself of that evil by performing the necessary rituals and chanting the special mantras that aid him in "digesting" and divesting himself of the evils contained in the gifts. In reality, however, the priests take on too much, and know too little of the necessary ritual formulas, to rid themselves of all the sins they acquire. They thus exist in a "perpetual state of moral crisis" as the "cess-pits" of the cosmos (Parry 1995, 123), destined to die horrible deaths as the accumulated sins eat away at them. So why accept? There is no single answer to the question, but here are some of the kinds of responses you might encounter should you ask this question of the givers and receivers of such "poisonous gifts." For some, such as the funeral priests, there may be few other choices of employment. This is the work they have been raised to do. They do it to feed themselves and their families. In Yanaimangalam, too, people use this explanation. Taking such customary payments is part of their service responsibility. If they refuse to accept sin-bearing gifts from landowners, they risk losing the right to perform their other services and

thus their right to receive their much needed shares of harvested grain and other gifted goods. Besides, the farmers have to be sin free for the fields to yield grain in the first place, grain that feeds the "whole village" through the mutual exchanges outlined in chapter 1.

In addition to these economic reasons for accepting the sins of others, many landowners in Yanaimangalam told me that those who take on such sins are unaffected by them. The sins will not "stick" to them because of their own bodily natures. In other words, they are thought to have a biomoral capacity to tolerate the intake of the sins and faults of others. I will discuss the relationship between caste and bodily nature in the next chapter, but here suffice it to say that many donors see the recipients as appropriate receptacles who would suffer no ill effects from taking on the evils, perhaps because of their already disorderly nature. In the case of Brahman priests, they are thought to know rituals and mantras that help them digest and dispose of the sins.

Of course, donors have one point of view. Receivers may have another. Many receivers do in fact link their relatively abject or low and even outsider status to their place in the practices of centrality. Instead of taking it in his stride, one barber, for example, told me that this work was a kind of curse given by God. Those who have other options might choose to stop receiving such gifts. As was stressed earlier, caste does not determine occupation, and the barber in Yanaimangalam chooses not to perform his hereditary occupation. Another case was a family of carpenters in Yanaimangalam that in 1989 had just started to refuse certain kinds of gifts from landlords. While they were quite pleased to receive the share of harvest they were due for their carpentry services, they stopped accepting a kind of gift called *pati*, which was said by some to be a way for farmers to transfer their sins to service castes. As the senior woman in the household told me, they refused to stand "like beggars" and take this gift.

In passing, I should note that the spatial layout of Yanaimangalam physically mirrors the position of different castes in Raheja's centrality diagram (see fig. 2.1). The dominant landowners live centrally in the Big Village, while service castes live on its edges, and Untouchables—thought of by some as chaotic and disordered beings, like sin itself—are kept out, even beyond the edges of ordered village space. The fact that dominant landowners have the power to enforce such segregation confirms that caste is an important form of political power. Many S.C. choose to leave the village for urban centers, where they say caste differences don't matter so much.

Scholarly Debates

Power or Purity

Scholars of Hinduism and kingship have debated the seeming puzzle concerning erstwhile kings and Brahmans. While kings held the highest rank in the political system, Brahmans were said to be the highest caste. Similarly in multicaste agrarian villages the dominant castes (landowners) are definitely the most powerful political actors but the Brahmans are seen as the highest caste. So who really ranks higher?

The concept of centrality informs this discussion, as Raheja (1988b) has shown. By coordinating to achieve a biomoral transfer of evil/sin out of the kingdom and so outside the moral order, king and Brahman together preserve the ordered world and cosmos. The king gives to Brahmans, and Brahman priests receive and digest the biomoral gifts of *dan*.[6] Both operate together in a single ritual-political process. As early as the 1950s, one scholar, A. M. Hocart argued that in Indian kingship the king was surrounded by a "priesthood" that included not only Brahmans but also all the service castes, which would take on and remove the king's sins and other disordering faults, thereby assuring the regenerative order of the kingdom as a whole. Later studies of caste show us that a similar logic works in villages. Instead of a king we have landowners whose own moral order and auspiciousness—ensured by sending evils to the periphery of their realm and beyond—also assured order and prosperity, symbolized in a bountiful harvest, for the whole. The biomoral differences among castes, then, are important for the reproduction of an ordered life for all. This ideally ordered life rests on a social order of exclusion and inequality.

While Euro-American cultural concepts are different, based more on the morality of "hard work" and "success," could we not say that in our society, too, the ordered and prosperous life of the whole rests in part on a social order of hierarchy, exclusion, and inequality?

Indian Conceptions or Not

One reviewer of this manuscript suggested that this chapter, and parts of the next, introduce cultural concepts that are not universally regarded as necessary for explaining caste in India. Indeed, there are other approaches to caste that downplay the relevance of such locally meaningful concepts as the ones I have outlined here. Declan Quigley and Murray Milner, each in different ways, argue for an analysis of caste that does not draw so much on indigenous understandings as on more universalizing models that see caste as a sort of strategic outcome of political processes or status concerns. Quigley (1993) argues that caste offered a structural solution to political instabilities in Indian kingship, and Milner (1994) offers a "general theory of status" that he applies to India as elsewhere. He argues that in India the Brahman elite historically gave shape to caste in an effort to uphold their status by articulating "sacredness" as a key element for status in Indian society. Like Dipankar Gupta (2000), both of these scholars argue that focusing exclusively on cultural meanings of caste gives rise to an exoticizing perspective in which caste and India are viewed as a strange other reality that defies comparative analysis.

Others argue that culturally meaningful concepts cannot be divorced from any analysis of social phenomena. Structures such as hierarchy and power differences operate everywhere together with meaning; neither is secondary to the other. The people for whom caste has everyday significance understand their actions in multiple meaningful dimensions. Those meanings greatly influence their practices, their own theories of reality, their real relations with one another, and the structures that result as they also condition those meanings. Attention to local meanings need not result in exoticizing, especially if readers take care to understand how meaning works in their own lives, how meanings both arise from and condition their own social structures, hierarchies, power differences, and political-economic relations. It is this process, of meaning and structure operating together, that we share with others.

Misconceptions

All Villages in India Are Similar

I cannot emphasize enough that not all villages in India are alike. Not all are multicaste. Not all conform to the social organization outlined here for relatively fertile agricultural regions. As Fuller (1989) has shown, there has been both regional and historical variation in the way labor and caste operate in agrarian India. The *jajmani* system has not been universal. Lower castes were not always inevitably tied to serving dominant castes.[7] And, as Gough and Kapadia show, agricultural labor can be viewed increasingly as a form of wage labor, not simply as hereditary service.

3

Personhood and Rank

Most popular accounts of caste in India focus almost exclusively on something on which we have not yet touched, namely, the hierarchy or, more specifically, the linear ranking of castes from high to low, from pure to impure, from Brahman to Untouchable. This chapter introduces some key ideas that frame our understanding of caste as rank, including some of the Hindu textual sources for those understandings. We also explore some of the realities of caste rankings in India today. It is especially important to note that: (1) ranking is only one aspect among many of caste; (2) caste rankings have never been as static as many think but are somewhat fluid, variable from place to place, and changeable over time; and (3) many Indians no longer condone ranking people according to caste.

In Yanaimangalam, concern with rank was especially pronounced in public contexts, even in the layout of public spaces. Take, for example, the arrangement of streets. Streets are named for the caste groups that predominate. What is more, the ordering of the streets from north to south follows the generally recognized rankings of these castes. That is, the northernmost street is the Agraharam, historically the neighborhood of vegetarian Brahmans. The next street is Pillaimar, home to high-ranking, vegetarian cultivators. Muppanar street is next, followed by Thevarmar. Members of both of these castes eat meat, and, while the Muppanars are considered farmers and merchants, villagers associate Thevars with violence, partly as a result of their historical involvement with politics, rebellion, and military service and partly as a result of British designations of this caste as "criminal." While there was some debate about the relative ranking of these two meat-eating castes, many did agree that Thevars, being more associated with violence, ranked lower despite the fact that Thevars were the most politically and economically powerful caste in the village. (Power and purity, as we shall see, are different scales of value. Brahmans have purity but little power; Thevars have power but little purity.) Untouchables were considered so impure that they ought not to live in the village at all. And even to this day some families from the higher

castes balk at allowing Untouchables to enter their houses. In temple festivals and other public events throughout India, such rankings are also reiterated spatially. At a festival for Yanaimangalam's village goddess, for example, only Brahmans were allowed into the small room nearest the relatively pure deity, while other caste leaders lined up approximately in the order of their rank and Untouchables remained outside (fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1: Untouchables make offerings to the goddess from outside and below the temple grounds.

Observing the fact of such rankings is not, however, the same thing as explaining them. Over the years, scholars have attempted to explain the cultural logic behind what they have observed. Since neither economic nor political explanations suffice to account fully for caste rankings, the explanation must lie elsewhere in the cultural world. In this chapter I will take a look at a couple of attempts to construct a feasible cultural explanation for the ranking of castes.

Pure and Impure

In 1966, the French anthropologist Louis Dumont published his influential book on caste, *Homo Hierarchicus*. Rather than focusing on just village economic or political systems, Dumont argued that caste permeated Hindu culture and manifested itself everywhere. He argued, furthermore, that caste was an essentially *religious* idea. He identified a single dimension of contrast—pure to impure—as the framework for caste hierarchy. Castes, he argued, were ranked

along a scale of relative purity depending on their relative involvement in biological or organic substances (the impure). Thus, those who were scholars and never ate meat or touched impure substances such as blood or feces would rank above those who tilled the soil and were therefore inevitably mixed with the life-and-death practices of cultivation. Cultivators, in turn, ranked above those who touched and washed the soiled clothes of others (washermen) or shaved hair and cared for corpses at death (barbers). Barbers ranked above those who made leather goods from the carcasses of dead animals (Untouchable leatherworkers) and so on. This hierarchy was seen as religious because the valuation of substances and people as pure or impure was seen to come from Brahmanical Hindu texts, beliefs, and practices.

Indeed, concepts of ranking such as this are found in many Hindu texts, including the earliest Sanskrit text, the Rg Veda, which dates as early as 1500 BCE. One origin myth from the Rg Veda details how in the beginning there was only "the man" (Purusa), a single totalizing entity that was "whatever has been and whatever is to be" (Doniger 1975, 27). This man was eventually sacrificed by the gods (never mind how they got there!) and afterward the different parts of his body became the different parts of the known universe. "The moon was born from his mind; the sun was born from his eye" (28). And what of humans? His mouth became the Brahmans, the teachers and chanters of mantras; his arms became the Ksatriyas, the nobles and kings; from his thighs came the Vaisyas, the common men who take care of land and business; from his feet came the Sudras, the service castes, the laborers (28). Untouchables are sometimes included among the Sudras and at other times are seen to exist entirely outside these four "*varnas*." In Hinduism, where the body itself is ranked from pure head to impure feet, the rankings of these *varnas* follow the ranking of this man's body.

Some Indians make use of these *varna* categories in self-reference, especially in parts of North India. Murray Milner notes that very few Indians claim Vaishya status, but *Brahman* and *Ksatriya* are widely used in self-reference. *Sudra* is a term that members of the higher *varnas* sometimes use to refer to lower-ranking castes, though in my experience it is rarely used in self-reference. Aruna, my key informant in Yanaimangalam, once complained that northern Indians consider all non-Brahman southern Indians to be Sudras. She whispered the term as if it were a bad word.

Even among Indians who use the *varna* categories to group themselves and others, the more relevant concept today is *jati*, a term that means, "birth group," "genus," or "kind." Further, while pure and impure are relevant contrasts in everyday life throughout India, other kinds of bodily substance

contrasts are also used. Consider this origin myth, which contains many elements of the older Vedic myth but was told by a Brahman priest in a South Indian village studied by E. Valentine Daniel.

> God was everything. In Him were the five elements of fire, water, earth, and ether, and wind. These five elements were uniformly spread throughout [the three humors] phlegm, bile, and wind. They were so evenly distributed that even to say that there were phlegm, bile, and wind would be wrong. Let us say that they were in such a way that one could not tell the difference between them. Let us say they were nonexistent. Similarly, the three primordial qualities, or dispositions [*gunas*], rajas, satva and tamas neither existed nor did not exist. . . . Then something happened. The five elements started to move around as if they were not satisfied, as if they were disturbed. . . . Now the gunas and humors and elements all started to move hither and thither. Then came the separation, as in an explosion, and all the jatis of the world—male jatis, female jatis, vegetable jatis, tree jatis, animal jatis, farmer jatis and Untouchable jatis—were formed, and they started meeting and mating and procreating. This is how the world came into being. (Daniel 1984, 3–5).

This myth hints at how each *jati*, each genus in this phenomenal universe, contains the same substances yet in different proportions. Castes, we learn later in Daniel's book and from other sources, are ranked in part based on the differential qualities of substance that make up their "nature." A classical Hindu text still commonly read, the Bhagavad-Gita, also distinguishes among *varnas* according to their varying proportions of the three qualities or *gunas* (Bhagavad-Gita 14:518, 18:40–47).[1]

Many rural and urban Hindus—though by no means all—continue to express an interest in maintaining boundaries between the pure and the impure, including between pure and impure castes. These boundaries are manifest in all sorts of ways, particularly through concern about sharing physical substances such as saliva, sexual fluids, and even touch.

Food exchange has been one of the most observable venues for this concern with maintaining boundaries.[2] If someone would not eat another's boiled food (e.g., rice or lentils) then you could infer that he or she ranked higher than the cook. If two people would each eat the other's food, then one could surmise that they considered themselves to be similarly ranked (or, these days, ignore caste distinctions). If someone would eat the food of a cook but the cook would not eat the food of the receiver, then you knew that the cook ranked highest. I like to tell my students that many vegetarian restaurants

in India hire only Brahman cooks. Because of their relative purity, everyone (except maybe other, higher-ranking Brahmans) will eat the food cooked by a Brahman. (Perhaps next time you choose to refuse a sip of one person's soda but turn around and accept a sip of someone else's, you might ask what subtle calculations of rank or difference this "pickiness" implies.)

The concern with maintaining caste boundaries requires further elaboration. Castes are not ranked in a fixed structure or order, and so it isn't always easy to know whose food you can or cannot eat. Rankings can change, and they vary from place to place. Some scholars, such as McKim Marriott, have argued that Hindu persons—and their rankings—are fluid and changeable. Persons are understood to be capable of literally sharing and transacting qualities with one another and so affecting their own and others' physical nature and well-being.

Dividuality and the Hindu Person

Anthropologist McKim Marriott's work on caste was motivated by his abiding interest in constructing an analytic framework for understanding Indian life that relied not on Western sociological concepts but on Hindu ones (1990, 1998). The Hindu concepts Marriott used were notably but not exclusively derived from Samkhya, one of several branches of Hindu philosophy.

According to Marriott's explanation of Hindu concepts, humans are thought to differ from one another, as well as from other kinds of creatures and things in the universe, because they all have different proportions of the same set of substances. These substances include the elements (fire, water, earth, wind, and ether), the humors (bile, phlegm, and wind), and the three qualities of *sattva* (goodness and light), *rajas* (passion and action), and *tamas* (darkness and inertia). He argued further that Hindus generally have understood themselves not as "individuals" in the Enlightenment-influenced European sense but rather as "dividuals," divisible persons made up of particulate substances able to flow across boundaries and thus be shared, exchanged, and transferred. One can visualize the difference this way. Imagine a pen drawing of a person outlined boldly with a solid line against a background of a different color. This bounded person is whole, integral, and contained within his or her solid boundary. A drawing of the dividual, on the other hand, would be a pointillist drawing, with innumerable dots composing the shape of the person but blending subtly with and even shading into the dots of his or her surroundings. These pointillist Hindus, Marriott argued, see their bodily nature and actions as both affecting and being affected by the world around them, by the soil on which they live and from which they

eat food, the houses in which they live, the deities and ancestors with whom they connect, and their actions in the world, as well as by their proximity and intimate exchanges with other humans.[3]

It was always a pleasant surprise for me when, while doing my fieldwork, people would say something that confirmed an idea I had read about before going to India, including this illustration of dividuality. In Yanaimangalam I was sometimes cautioned against making forays to Thevar street. I lived on the Agraharam, and some of my neighbors, including my high-caste Pillaimar landlord, expressed in various terms what twelve-year-old Kuru once summarized succinctly, "They are no good." I asked, "What about Ramayya Thevar?" He was an older neighbor in the Agraharam (in fact, many Thevars had used their new prosperity to buy up houses abandoned by Brahmans) and was generally respected on the street. Yes, my neighbors generally concurred, he had a good nature/quality (*guna*). But his good nature, I learned, was no counterargument to the Thevar nature in general. Ramayya Thevar, they explained, had become "habituated" into a better quality of person due to his daily life in the Agraharam. The soil of the place itself, as well as the people living there, had imparted to him "good" Brahman-like qualities that were absent from those living just a few lanes away.

Marriott has argued that much personal action is devoted, at least in part, to maintaining or altering one's own "nature" either by not mixing with things that might alter you in a disagreeable manner or, conversely, by seeking out transactions—such as with pure and beneficent gods or humans—that might at least temporarily enhance your qualities, or "polish" them (*samskara*). He based his point on evidence that people from different *jatis* used different kinds of strategies to maintain their varied natures. Members of the central, landowning castes, for example, engaged in many different transactions with all sorts of people but were careful to avoid polluting substances, and Brahmans tended to give much more than they received in an effort to maintain their high rank. Members of the lower castes made themselves low in part by receiving more than they gave from many different kinds of people since they required more inputs (especially food) in order to survive. Some *jatis* seem to avoid transacting with others in any direction, setting themselves apart almost as islands in the otherwise flowing seas of intercaste transactions. Marriott called these four transactional strategies, respectively, maximal, optimal, pessimal, and minimal (1976).

Marriott's perspective on caste and society thus takes exchange or transaction to be the basic mode of being a person in the Hindu world. The work humans must do is channeling and controlling these ubiquitous transactions in order to shape self, other, and world. Significantly, recognition of such a transactional view of reality shifts our attention from structures to processes and actions, from how human beings are *positioned* to how they *relate, enact,* and *remake* their world. Hinduism begins to appear as a worldview predicated on action, flux, flow, control, and the variable qualities of persons as they are made and remade through exchanges, transferals, and movements of substances.

MISCONCEPTIONS

There is always a danger when discussing caste that readers will see it as something that consumes all aspects of life and creates rigid social compartmentalizations. While exclusions and inequalities for many Untouchables even today may seem insurmountable, for the majority of others the everyday feeling of these caste distinctions is much more fluid and flexible. People of different castes work together, live as neighbors, and become friends. Furthermore, many Indians pay little heed to caste rankings and divisions. They eat together across caste lines and even protest that ranking people according to caste is distasteful and old-fashioned. Like many Americans who find racism intolerable, so many in India find "casteism" abhorrent. It is illegal in India to discriminate against someone based on caste, and affirmative-action-type programs (called "reservations") intend to make up for past discrimination in schooling and employment. Nevertheless, because the ranking aspect of caste is so different from ranking systems in the United States and Europe, which are formed more prominently around class and race distinctions, it is here that many common misconceptions about caste arise.

Caste is Always and Only about Hierarchy or Rank

As the first two chapters make clear, caste is about many different modes of relating. Sometimes it appears to be about reciprocal economic ties, sometimes about power and social order, and sometimes about regulating the flow of substances—whether sins or impurities—among bodies or between bodies and places. For some, the meaning of caste has been stripped of many of these connotations and become something more akin to a sense of "compatibility." A few years ago I taught a course on Hinduism at Washington University in Saint Louis, and a majority of the students in the class were Hindus whose parents had migrated to the United States for study or work. When I taught about caste in the class, many objected that in their view caste was "social" and had nothing to do with Hinduism. I challenged some of them to go home

and find out for sure. Several students went home—to suburbs of Chicago, Nashville, and Philadelphia—and conducted surveys in their local Hindu American communities. They found that while almost none of their community thought that Hindus should discriminate against others due to caste almost all of them agreed that ideally their children would marry someone from the same caste. Caste, for them, meant likeness and so compatibility.

Castes are the Same All Over India

There are many, many named *jatis* in India, and each region has castes that are unique. Any attempt to create a pan-Indian list of castes, let alone a consistent ranking of them, would be absurd. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, some British colonial ethnographers tried to do this, with profound consequences that we will consider later.

Caste Rankings are Fixed and Unchangeable

Castes are not rigid compartments whose meanings are predetermined. Caste is always a work in progress—subtle, shifting, argued, and indefinite. This is due not only to debates and movements against casteism today but also due to Hindu ideas about the person, which, as we have seen, are fluid and changeable. It is possible for entire castes to change their rank and reputation by changing the nature of their interactions and hence their perceived qualities or natures. The anthropologist M. N. Srinivas coined the term *Sanskritization* to describe the process in which locally organizable caste groups—especially low- and middle-ranking groups—would mimic the actions of upper castes in order to achieve a better fit with high-caste purity and order standards and so raise their standing in local caste rankings. They could, for example, become vegetarians, dress like higher-caste neighbors, hire Brahman priests to officiate at their rituals, and emulate the life-cycle rituals of the higher castes. Through this process entire caste groups could change their local community status over time.

Caste Rankings are the Same within Regions

Caste rankings may differ even between villages that are relatively close together. Because of the many aspects of caste, because any caste group could conceivably become dominant landowners, and because of processes such as Sanskritization, caste rankings may vary from place to place and even from one year to the next. People disagree on caste rankings, too.

India has Caste and Other Places have Class

India has both. In fact, many people today see economic class as a path to status that matters much more than caste. Viramma, an Untouchable laborer is quoted as saying that in this day and age "money's the master and when you know how to earn it, you make yourself higher than you were the day before" (Viramma, Racine and Racine, 1997, 160).

Caste is Illegal

That would be like an American saying that race is illegal. Certainly in India it is illegal to discriminate against a person because of caste, just as it is illegal in the United States to discriminate against a person because of race. But caste itself cannot be illegal. *Jati*, remember, means "birth group." Everyone has one, even the anthropologist.

Caste is Hindu

While the concept of caste, or at least major elements of it, is most strongly associated with Hinduism and reflected most obviously in Hindu texts, caste also conditions the lives of Christians, Muslims, Jains, and others living in South Asia.

Caste is the Same as Race

In 2001, the World Conference against Racism was held in Durban, South Africa. Caste was one form of "racism" up for discussion. But is caste the same as race? Both caste and race are cultural concepts—not biological—that arose in particular historical contexts: caste arose in South Asia and race arose in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America. While the concepts are quite different in many ways, to an extent they both do map inequality onto perceived differences in human "nature." So even though the concepts differ strikingly, and ought not to be lumped together, we can say that in context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries caste and race both belong to the same discourse about justice, equality, and human rights.[4]

4

Caste and Colonialism

The meanings of caste are changing and shifting. Many Indians increasingly adopt egalitarian views and ignore caste rankings. New opportunities for education and employment, including working-class jobs in urban centers, give lower-caste people greater independence from agriculturally-based caste relations. But caste is not changing only now. It has been changing all along. And, while some aspects of caste may be losing strength among the new middle classes and urbanites, other uses of caste are gaining in strength. In particular, over the course of the last 150 years caste has increasingly become a basis for collective identity and political organization in India. This chapter and the next trace some of the historical conditions and movements that have given rise to this modern aspect of "caste as political organization." In this chapter, I introduce some of the British colonial actions and policies that brought about this new use of caste.

Both this chapter and the next aim to address a persistent misconception, namely, that caste as it exists today is an unchanging "tradition," an ancient mode of organizing society that has somehow defied modernity or social change. On the contrary, caste, like many other concepts and practices we sometimes assume to be ancient or "traditional," has been and continues to be altered historically. Caste today must be understood as a significant modern phenomenon despite its deep indigenous roots. These two chapters trace some of the modern transformations of caste, beginning with British colonialism.

Colonialism and Culture

Great Britain colonized India officially in 1858 but had a significant presence there, through the British East India Company, from the early 1600s. Caste as it operates in India today bears a heavy British legacy. The British, influenced by their own cultural categories and understandings of class, attempted to identify and fix caste orders to create rational social categories they could count, characterize, and create policies about. They effectively turned fluid

and locally disparate *jatis* into fixed all-India categories and as a result created new social identities that Indians, in turn, shaped further. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that caste as it works in India today is almost entirely an outcome of colonial practices and policies. While that may be going too far, it is no exaggeration to say that the modern phenomenon of caste was strongly influenced by British ideas, practices, and policies.

Wherever colonization occurs, it has a deep impact on the culture and society of the colonized. Colonization is not just a matter of one society commanding and profiting from another. The structure of empire reorders and restructures the whole of the colonized society by creating policies, laws, centralization, education systems, new languages of governance, bureaucracies, taxation systems, and land tenure laws that deeply penetrate all aspects of life. These changes stretch beyond even the political, social, and economic structures of life and into the very ideas people have about the nature of the world and themselves. Concepts such as caste may retain salience in new colonial structures, but they are inevitably transformed at the same time.

Caste and the Census

One colonial practice that profoundly impacted caste was the official British census of India. A census is an official count or enumeration of the population of an administrative unit, such as a nation, state, or county, that also usually contains basic demographic information. The United States conducts a census of its entire population every ten years and includes information on age, sex, marital status, household size, health, income, race, ethnicity, and so on. This enumerated information is used in various ways to keep track of and determine policy concerning the population.

In the early years of census taking in India, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British officials limited their work to local and regional "revenue surveys" in order to understand the landownership and taxation customs of Indians. These surveys enabled the British government to tap into appropriate revenue sources or what we might call the "tax base" of the society. From revenue surveys, the census developed slowly to include more and more demographic information concerning religion, caste, literacy, village boundaries, health, marriage, family size, and other concerns.

In a famous article called "The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification" (1987), Bernard Cohn made a groundbreaking argument that the census was hardly a simple counting mechanism but had actually changed the way Indians thought about many cultural realities, including caste. Cohn's argument, in short, was that the work of designing census categories and then counting and

governing the population according to the information gathered therein in fact created a new kind of cultural reality in India, a reality in which Indians began to see themselves at least partly through British-made categories.

The British rationalized their census work on the basis of administrative necessity: without knowledge of the population under their governance, how would they rule effectively? Cohn quotes a British official, one Mr. Beverly, who in 1872 argued:

> Without information [regarding the population] the basis is wanting on which to found accurate opinions on such important matters as the growth and rate of increase of the population, sufficiency of food supplies, the incidence of local and imperial taxes, the organization of adequate judicial and police arrangements, the spread of education and public health measures. (quoted in Cohn 1987, 242).

But the way Indians understood their social world did not accord with British ways of thinking or with British categories of social life, which were often drawn not from their careful research on Indian society but from their own experience at home in England.[1] As a result of this disjuncture of categories, the British census was rife with difficulties. They found it difficult to even determine measurable units. For example, what is a village as opposed to a town? What is a "household" or "family," a fact not at all easy to determine; people might share incomes and all cook together yet live in separate "houses" or live in one house divided into sections around separate kitchens. What is an "adult"? At one point the British decided that boys were adults at age twelve and girls at ten. What is a "farmer"? Is it someone whose sole occupation is farming or someone who derives at least a little income from farming but works elsewhere doing other jobs such as commerce or washing clothes? What "religions" do people follow? This isn't easy to determine, either, in a place where many people combine elements of many religious traditions in various ways.

Of great importance to British officials was gathering knowledge about caste and religion. The British assumed that caste and religion had a determining effect on the character of the population and were, for Indians, the fundamental bases for social organization. But what Cohn argued is that in fact the British way of counting and assigning caste created significant alterations in how Indians understood themselves. We know from our own experience how muddy categories of identity can be. What is our "race" or "ethnicity" and how much does that identity condition our experience? We may think it doesn't matter, yet our classification might make us eligible or ineligible for various kinds of programs, scholarships, educational opportunities, or access

to health programs. It might affect how others imagine us or how we even imagine ourselves as, say, a nation of different ethnicities, of majorities and minorities based on something that genetics tells us doesn't really matter.[2] These categories have relevance for how we live and think about ourselves in relation to the whole society. Census categories inevitably distort the more flexible and multifaceted reality of our lives, but at the same time, because they are used for policy making and are backed by the power of the government, they have the power to define some aspects of our experience.

Take caste. We know already that caste has been a fairly fluid way of organizing aspects of *local* social life. We know that there are thousands of castes in India but that they have meaning mostly only locally and regionally. We know that caste was not universally relevant in precolonial India. We know that caste rank can change, be disputed, and vary from one village to the next. And we know that caste means more than one thing even in the same locality; some stress mutuality, others centrality, and others rank. How were the British to systematize and confine to fixed census categories such a fluid variability?

Among many of the specific conceptual problems riddling the British census categories for caste is the fact that they confused *varna* and *jati* and so tried to fit all *jatis* into the four *varnas* in order to count Indians as either Brahmans (priests and scholars), Ksatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaisyas (commoners), or Sudras (servants). To many Indians this made no sense. *Varna* and *jati* are not the same thing, as we have seen; and in many parts of India *varna* is irrelevant to local understandings of *jati*. The British also tended to conflate caste with occupation, so if your caste was Brahman, for example, your occupation was assumed to be priest. If you were a carpenter, you must do carpentry. If you were a Rajput, you were assumed to be a warrior and positively predisposed for military service.

These classifications did affect peoples' lives. Take, for example, the 1933 book called *The Martial Races of India*, in which George MacMunn set out to determine which castes in India were "martial" castes and so fit for military service. As Nicholas Dirks (2001) summarizes, it turns out that martial castes as defined by the British were mostly North Indian (Sikhs, Punjabis, Rajputs, Dogras, Gurkhas, and Pathans) and, in McMunn's view, the descendants of the "original white [Aryan] race," thought to have distant biological and historical kinship with the "European races." To this day, these castes serve disproportionately in the police and military and are thought by many Indians to be best suited for such service. The British also determined (we could say imagined) that, just as there were martial castes, so, too were there criminal castes (many of these were South Indian and thought to be non-Aryan), all

members of which were considered to be predisposed to criminality and so in need of rigorous surveillance. To this day, many caste groups still carry this reputation, including Yanaimangalam's Thevars.[3]

From these attempts to classify and know the citizenry's predilections through caste identification, we can see that the British thought that to know a person's caste was to know about the person, their character and tendencies. The British, in other words, had a nineteenth-century "racial" view of caste; using what is now considered an antiquated and completely inaccurate idea of race, they saw castes as separate races with different essences or natural temperaments and qualities.

One method the British used to classify castes was anthropometry. Anthropometry is the measuring of body parts in an attempt to classify persons according to their physical type and often their race. The iconic scientific instrument of anthropometry is the caliper. Dirks has written about colonial anthropologist Edgar Thurston's use of anthropometry in South India. Thurston made all sorts of measurements, including "the shape and size of the skull, the face, and the nasal index; the relation of head size to body size; and the relative sizes of upper extremities, the arm space, and the distance between the middle finger and the knee cap, for English, Brahmans, Pariahs, Paniyans, and Negroes" (Dirks 2001, 185), the latter three numbering among South India's "Scheduled Castes" (Untouchables). Among Thurston's insights were that one could distinguish the European skull from the Hindu one (1909, xlvi), that Aryan noses are more aquiline than Dravidian ones (li–lii), that "intelligence is in inverse proportion to the breadth of the nose" (Thurston 1896, quoted in Dirks 2001, 185), and that anthropometry could be used to identify criminal castes (186). The validity of this method and its theoretical premise—that one can distinguish essential racial characteristics—have been thoroughly discredited by modern science.

Another particularly telling example of how the British distorted Indian practices and understandings came in the official effort to construct a systematic ranking of all Indian castes. Despite difficulties encountered, many attempts were made. For example, Cohn shows how in the 1881 census the census employees (usually educated Indians) were asked to place all *jatis* (but only "true" ones) into one of five categories: Brahman, Rajput, Castes of Good Social Position, Castes of Inferior Social Position, and Non-Hindu or Aboriginal castes (later called Tribes). Indian "experts" (mostly high caste) were hired to determine the ranks, but these experts often had their own points of view and debated the rankings among themselves. Hindu texts were referred to, but they were written by Brahmans, who had their own biases, too.

Despite the problematic nature of the whole enterprise, because the British used caste to categorize, measure, and create policy about its colonial subjects, caste became important to Indians in new ways. Cohn quotes the Indian anthropologist G. S. Ghurye.

> The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given in the census, which has been progressively elaborate in each successive census since 1872. The total result has been, as we have seen, a livening up of the caste-spirit. (Ghurye 1932, quoted in Cohn 1987, 241).

The Rise of Caste Associations

Susan Bayly, in *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, details how this "caste-spirit" took the form of "caste associations," organizations that aimed to define the unity and promote the social and political interests of their respective castes as defined in the census. Caste associations made ample use of new publishing technologies to create and disseminate caste directories, caste histories, and other kinds of informational pamphlets that aided the construction of these identities across a wider region. As a result of these kinds of efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, caste increasingly became a basis for collective identity at a regional and even national level (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006, 137–44). These organizations effectively transformed what had previously been a fairly localized phenomenon (families of various castes relating to one another in small regions) into political and social units operating in relation to the nation as a whole, crafting new histories and identities, lobbying for their group interests, and forming political parties.

Among the key issues for many caste associations both then and now was that of equal or fair representation in education, legislative bodies, and government jobs. Census data from the early twentieth century reveal that Brahmans dominated the top educational institutions and were disproportionately represented among the elite, Western-educated advisers to the British government. For example, in the Madras Presidency, the southernmost jurisdiction of British India, Brahmans comprised only 3 percent of the population, yet they accounted for 70 percent of all college graduates and held about the same percentage of high-level government jobs (Wilkinson 2006, 189). The position of Brahmans in late colonial Indian society had several outcomes. One was the growth of a sometimes virulent "anti-Brahman" movement that saw Brahmans as unfairly privileged beneficiaries of a religious hierarchy. "Non-Brahman" caste and political associations organized against

Brahman domination in education and government and called for the "uplift" of those castes officially designated as "Backward" in the census reports. Caste uplift was sometimes to be achieved by means of a caste association calling for its members to Sanskritize, that is, to change habits that were seen as "degrading," but they were also to be aided by government affirmative action programs that took the form of quota systems in which a certain number of positions in educational institutions, government, and legislative councils were "reserved" for perceived minority groups, including minority religious groups such as Muslims. The colonial government was complicit with anti-Brahman sentiments, for it, too, feared Brahman dominance and organization. The predominant nationalist groups in India were organized by Brahmans. These groups worked in opposition to colonial aims and in the twentieth century increasingly called for the end of British rule in favor of "self-rule" and independence.

In short, because the population was enumerated by caste in the census, and because British officials recognized caste as an authentic category of public interest at a national level, Indian subjects responded by participating in the creation of caste as a route to self-understanding as well as political organization. By the early twentieth century, caste had become an important rubric under which subjects called for rights, economic relief, and justice. Bayly points out that even when interests were more self-evidently economic, such as peasant cultivators needing relief measures after a crop failure, the cultivators tended to organize not by economic identity (peasant cultivator) but by caste association (Bayly 1999, 242–43). Caste was becoming the language of political organization.

The Politics of Caste

The rise of caste associations in the twentieth century has had several outcomes for the organization of Indian politics today, two of which I will mention here. First, today caste associations often form the core constituencies—the "base"—of political parties in democratic India. Sometimes these constituencies come to be defined almost like ethnic groups, and so caste—once fluid and variable in meaning across a territory—is becoming more fixed as something like ethnicity (Fuller 1997, 22–26). As Pamela Price puts it:

> Ambitious politicians, hoping to capture electoral advantages and possibly the state government, encourage the emergence of marked ethnic identities in an attempt to develop their own ethnic constituency as their base of electoral power. (1993, 501).

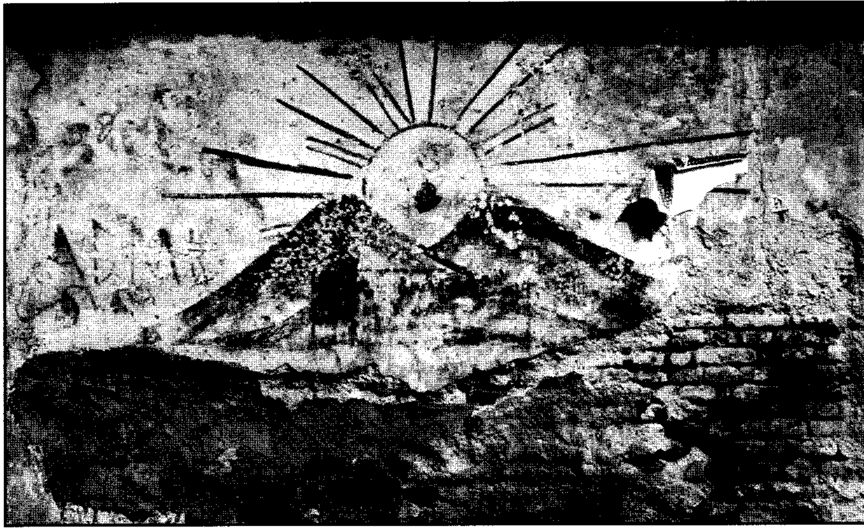


Fig. 4.1: Political party symbol painted on a wall. (©Richard Rapfogel, used with permission.)

Because politicians want their constituencies—the members of their political parties—to expand in order to increase their probability of winning elections, many of these caste groups have started to combine with others to create a kind of supercaste identity. For example, in South India, Thevars today constitute part of such a supercaste. The name, Thevar, is now often applied to what in previous times and contexts were considered to be several different castes, which would not intermarry or even share food because of the perceived qualitative and hierarchical differences between them. In recent years Thevars have joined forces to support the popular, and often ruling, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a popular Tamilnadu party, often in opposition to Tamilnadu's Dalits (Untouchables) who support other parties. Such supercastes and caste-based political parties are forming all over India. On the national level, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), founded in 1984 by Dr. Ambedkar (see chapter 5), has won significant victories in Indian states, including the influential Uttar Pradesh. This party, too, bases its constituency on caste identities. Here is a statement from its website:

> The ideology of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is "Social Transformation and Economic Emancipation" of the "Bahujan Samaj," which comprises of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Religious Minorities such as Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Buddhists and account for over 85 percent of the country's total population. The people belonging to all these classes have

> been the victims of the [Brahmanical caste] system in the country for thousands of years, under which they have been vanquished, trampled upon and forced to languish in all spheres of life. In other words, these people were deprived even of all those human rights, which had been secured for the upper caste Hindus under the age-old [Brahmanical] social system. (http://bspindia.org accessed March 9, 2009).

Another issue that enlivens caste politics today is the "reservation" system, an affirmative action program. After independence, the government of India set forth several provisions to compensate for caste discrimination. For example, in Part XVI (Special Provisions Relating to Certain Classes) of the Constitution of India, Articles 332 and 335 address, respectively, legislative and employment reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, that is, for former "Untouchable" and other indigenous minority groups.

> 332. Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of the States.
>
> (1) Seats shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, [except the Scheduled Tribes in the autonomous districts of Assam], in the Legislative Assembly of every State.
>
> 335. Claims of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to services and posts.
>
> The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State. Provided that nothing in this article shall prevent in making of any provision in favour of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes for relaxation in qualifying marks in any examination or lowering the standards of evaluation, for reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of services or posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State.

Over the years, the Indian government has continued to update these measures by calling on commissions (fact-finding agencies) to make recommendations concerning caste-based reservations. Some of these commission findings and recommendations have resulted in considerable social debate, which I will outline in a later chapter. Today the government continues to collect caste data in its census using the categories Forward Castes, Backward Castes, Most Backward Castes, Other Backward Castes, and Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The use of these classifications for affirmative

action purposes has resulted in several caste-organized political strategies. For example, many among those designated as belonging to "Forward Castes" protest any affirmative action programs as these are viewed as disadvantaging them and/or perpetuating caste. Others take a different approach and argue for downgrading their caste ranking in order to qualify for the benefits accorded to lower categories. Allow me to quote at length a June 2007 *New York Times* article that illustrates this trend. Note that the writer erroneously characterizes caste as *traditionally* "regimented" and "still-rigid" when, as we have seen, most regimentation was an outcome of colonial views and practices.

> NEW DELHI, June 2 — A fight for the right to be downwardly mobile exploded this week in north India, as a powerful community of Indian shepherds asserted that the best way to rise up in modern society was to take a step down in the regimented class hierarchy here.
>
> Tension over the still-rigid caste classifications, which underpin the Indian social system, spilled over into riots across Rajasthan State, with at least 23 people killed.
>
> . . . [This violence] stemmed from controversy over a demand from the Gujjar community, traditionally farmers and shepherds, to have its caste status officially downgraded, relegating it to the bottom of the caste ladder.
>
> Doing so would allow Gujjars to qualify for greater benefits under India's affirmative action program, along with Dalits (also known as Untouchables) and tribal communities. (Gentlemen, 2007).

To conclude, caste in India today is no throwback to ancient tradition. It is part postcolonial construct, a transformed and modern phenomenon, aspects of which have emerged out of the colonial encounter. Through the practices of colonization and the Indian response, caste has become a thing, an object, that Indians consciously strategize about and fight over in ways that they never did prior to colonialism.

5

CASTE AND INDIAN NATIONALISM

We have established that caste in India today is not a throwback to some fading tradition but is in many ways a phenomenon that was made more concrete and universal through colonial practices. In this chapter we take a look at how Indian nationalist politics in the early twentieth century also played a role in shaping caste as it is understood and used in India today. In the lead-up to Indian independence from Britain in 1947, caste was one of the key issues among nationalists, that is, among those Indian subjects who organized the struggle for independence. In confronting caste, they, too, had an impact on changing it. I will focus here mostly on the important issue of untouchability, but I will turn first to some background information on the nationalist struggle.

THE SELF-RULE MOVEMENT AND THE INDIAN ELECTORATE

One of the most pressing political issues for both Indians and the British government at the turn of the twentieth century was the desire by Indian subjects to have more self-governance.[1] Under pressure, the British slowly began to grant more rights to Indians to participate in governance. In 1909, the Morley-Minto Reforms for the first time allowed Indians to hold majority seats in provincial legislative assemblies (similar to U.S. state-level legislatures) and to participate in elections for those seats. However, there were limits to these reforms. First, the British retained power over the central government. Second, they retained veto power over any legislation passed by provincial assemblies. Third, only the most elite Indians, many of whom were Western-educated and often in agreement with some British policies, were allowed to vote or serve. Fourth, while the principle of elections was introduced, the operation of the elections was quite indirect. Unlike U.S. elections, in which each adult has a vote, here groups of elite Indians were given the right to elect members of the legislative councils and the latter were allowed to elect representatives to the central government. Fifth, the act established something called a "separate electorate" for British India's Muslim minority. This meant

that certain seats in the legislative assemblies were reserved for Muslims and only Muslims could vote for those seats. This idea of a separate electorate for Muslims was intended to ensure that the Muslim minority would have a voice in governance. This provision was to have a lasting impact on Indian politics and fed directly into the dispute on untouchability that this chapter relates.

Indians continued to press for greater political power, especially in the wake of World War I. Many Indian soldiers had fought in the British army, and the British had financed the war in part from Indian revenues. All of this caused financial and personal strains for many Indians. The major Indian nationalist organization was called the Indian National Congress Party (Congress for short). Congress and the Muslim League, the dominant Muslim party, met jointly in 1915–16 to press demands for increased self-governance. Given the pressure of the situation, the British had to make some concessions in order to avoid rebellion and maintain their rule. In 1919 the powers of provincial assemblies were expanded and noises were made about granting self-rule to India eventually. But the measures were incomplete, progress was slow, and the British maintained wartime powers that allowed them to jail members of the opposition more easily (e.g., they often sent Mahatma Gandhi and other members of Congress to jail with indefinite terms of detention). In other words, even though the electorate was expanded and provincial assemblies were given increasing control over agriculture, education, and local taxes to support those endeavors, the British retained control over law and order and refused to give up control over the central government. And still only about 10 percent of Indians were eligible to vote in elections.

The slow pace of real reform accompanied by oppressive taxation and continued repressive measures by the colonial government to silence opposition led Congress to employ increasingly strong tactics to push for self-rule. In 1930, Congress declared India's independence from Britain and began in earnest the new tactic of nonviolent protest for which Gandhi is so famous. Historians have well documented the many complex and interesting dimensions of the history of this movement, but for our purposes we will zero in on the question that Susan Bayly poses, namely, what significance did caste hold for Congress leaders and their rivals in the years after 1920 when electoral rights were expanded and the independence movement was growing (Bayly 1999, 246).

Untouchability and the Indian Electorate

Prior to the reforms we are discussing here, Indian participation in the British colonial government had followed a kingly model in which the British reigned but took advice from community leaders. These leaders were understood

by the British to be representatives of what they considered the "natural" communities of caste and religion. Community leaders were to pay obeisance of a sort to the British command and were granted rights accordingly. Granting communities special voting rights, such as the Morley-Minto Pact had done for the Muslim minority, followed in part from this British conception of caste and religion as the natural social units of Indian society.

But Indian nationalists were interested in promoting a different construction of the Indian citizenry. In 1885 about seventy English-educated elite Indians, predominantly Brahman, sought to increase Indian representation in government using a different political language, one adopted from Western models of representational democracy. These founders of the Indian National Congress Party thought that self, caste, and religious affiliation should be subordinated to the public good and Indians should come together *as Indians* (not Hindus or Muslims or this caste or that) to gain greater participation in legislative councils and the Indian civil service (government jobs). The Congress Party operated in opposition to the prevailing British effort to divide the Indian population into constituent groupings (castes and religions) that would compete with one another and fail to unite for the cause of self-rule, independence.[2] By the early twentieth century, Congress had ramped up its efforts both to gain self-governance and to do away with the idea of caste as the organizing principle for the electorate. It was in the context of this effort that the issue of untouchability became a central problem for Indian nationalists.

Congress needed to unite Indians behind the movement for self-rule. As such, its leaders needed to dampen divisions that, in part due to colonial presuppositions about castes as "natural" communities and policies that underwrote such communities, had grown among the Indian population. Not only did Congress, a Hindu-dominated party, need to unite with the Muslim League, but among Hindus, too, caste disputes, including anti-Brahman sentiments, needed to be put aside in order to create a unified civil disobedience movement against the British. This was not an easy task. In truth, many persons from the so-called Backward or depressed castes were somewhat partial to British policy in part due to the quota system, which held out the possibility of reform, and in part due to their suspicions of Congress elites, many of whom were of the highest castes.

Especially important among these lower-ranking castes were the so-called Untouchables, who, because of the deep discrimination practiced against them by other members of Indian society, thought that they, like Muslims, needed a separate electorate in order to guarantee their rights and participation in government. In other words, Untouchable leaders argued that Untouchables, too, constituted a

minority community (outside the Hindu majority) and hence wished to have certain "seats" in the legislative assemblies reserved for Untouchable candidates while also allowing only Untouchables to be eligible to vote for those reserved seats and candidates. This would assure not only that Untouchables would be able to put forward their own candidates for office but that they would also be guaranteed the representation that they alone had voted for.

Gandhi and other members of the Congress Party vehemently opposed this move, not only on the philosophical grounds that caste and religion ought not be reckoned in definitions of citizenship but also on practical ones. Practically, they argued that Untouchables should be considered part of the Hindu majority and therefore not receive any special voting rights. Congress was particularly concerned that granting Untouchables special minority status would "split" the potential Hindu vote and make it more difficult for the party to win a clear electoral majority, something it needed if it was to mount a united opposition to British rule. Susan Bayly shows, for example, that if Untouchables were granted a separate electorate, as were Muslims, then there would be a Muslim plurality in some areas (1999, 261). Such a plurality for Muslims, it was thought, could potentially create conflict not only between Hindus and Muslims in those areas (Zelliot 1996, 168) but also between caste Hindus and Untouchables. Such conflicts were best avoided because the British could use them to further justify their role as the rulers and peacekeepers of India.

Congress, including its most famous member, Gandhi, therefore made it a political priority to work against separate electorates. But to convince Untouchables to unite with them Congress leaders knew they needed to convince Untouchables that they, too, would have a place in the national story. In order to ensure this, Gandhi worked to redefine untouchability in inclusive terms. In so doing, he entered into a public debate with a prominent Untouchable leader, B. R. Ambedkar, about how best to redress the injustices of untouchability.

Gandhi and Ambedkar

Mohandas K. Gandhi is, of course, one of India's most famous figures. Born in western India in 1869, Gandhi studied law in England and went to South Africa in 1893 to practice law. Facing discrimination there under the system of apartheid, a state policy of racial segregation, he became active in politics in South Africa and fought against apartheid, which only ended in 1991. Gandhi moved back to India in 1915 and, drawing on his experiences in South Africa, became a leader and champion of the cause of Indian independence. Perhaps

his most famous contribution to politics was his "nonviolent" mode of protest, the Satyagraha or "quest for truth." He organized multiple protests against British domination to great effect. His method of nonviolent protest had a worldwide impact. For example, Martin Luther King traveled to India in 1959 to visit Gandhi's family and learn about Gandhi's resistance techniques as he launched his own nonviolent civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s.

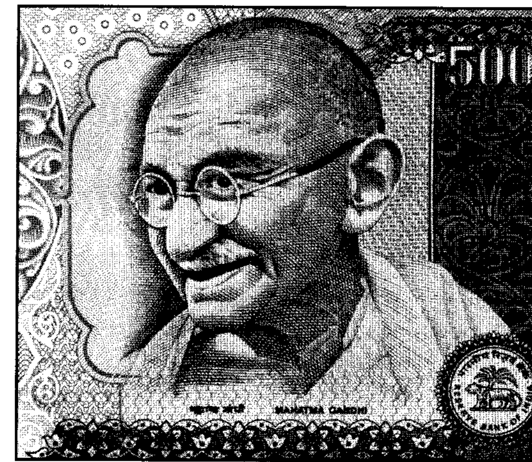


Fig. 5.1: Gandhi's portrait adorns most Indian rupee notes. (©Richard Rapfogel, used with permission.)

Gandhi's discourse on untouchability was developed in the wake of the Congress Party's 1920 "Resolution on Non-Cooperation." This resolution was intended to cement Hindu-Muslim unity so that all Indians would join forces in resisting the British. The resolution also included a statement on the need to ensure social justice for Untouchables. As Bayly explains, the solution put forward by Gandhi and other Congress Party leaders was less a political solution than a religious one. Instead of legislating reform, they called for Hindu leaders to reform Hinduism and rid it of the "reproach of untouchability" (Bayly 1999, 247, quoting Zelliot 1988, 185). In addition, Gandhi's followers worked to elevate the status of Untouchables by promoting among them a Hinduism-based sensibility about purity and religiosity. They established ashrams, intentional communities where Untouchables were taught Gandhian Hindu virtues such as temperance, vegetarianism, and religious devotion. Such acts were intended to rid them of the stigma of impurity by raising them to a proper Hindu (Gandhian) ethic.

As part of his effort to rethink caste exclusions, Gandhi promoted an idealized concept of *varna*, that is, the division of the population into different classes, each with its own duty to perform (Bayly 1999, 251; Dirks 2001, 268). As we saw above, *varna* is usually understood as a Hindu ranking of humans into four classes: Brahmans (priests), Ksatriyas (kings and nobles), Vaisyas (commercial castes), and Sudras (servants and workers), with Untouchables

in the reckoning of many generally falling outside the ranking altogether, hence outcastes. For Gandhi, however, the idea of *varna* did not denote rank but rather a cooperative social venture within which each class—including Untouchables—provided a service to the whole, and for the benefit of all, much like the idealized concept of mutuality that we learned about in earlier chapters.[3] He argued that caste ranking was an aberration, a degraded form of the *varna* system of mutual cooperation for the good of the whole (268). "Caste has nothing to do with religion," he stated (quoted on 267). He saw as his task the reformation of Hinduism "back" to what he argued was its ideal, pure form absent the inauthentic "degradation" of social inequality.

One manifestation of this religious work was Gandhi's participation in a temple entry movement. Untouchables were usually excluded from Hindu temples, but during this period of time there were several efforts by various political organizations to conduct marches into Hindu temples by Untouchables. These efforts were not particularly successful, and in fact the exclusion of Untouchables from temples continues in many places to this day. So, too, do continued efforts by today's government to use Hindu temples as sites for signifying caste unity and Untouchable inclusion.[4]

Gandhi's rhetoric was aimed at changing the image of Untouchables from polluted outcastes to "Harijans" or "children of god." As Bayly writes (1999), Gandhi created an image of an idealized Untouchable, a child of god, the dutiful and humble sweeper who cleansed the nation as he or she swept clean the dirt of others. Gandhi attempted to uphold the Harijan as the ideal of sacrifice and devotion to the nation. To make his point, Gandhi and his followers also did the work usually reserved for Untouchables. They cleaned their own toilets and swept the streets of their ashrams, their special Gandhian communities.

But many Untouchable leaders balked at what they saw as a condescending image of the humble Untouchable and the idea that Hinduism would offer a solution to the degradation and mistreatment of Untouchables. The most prominent advocate of a different, political solution was B. R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was born in 1891.[5] Himself an Untouchable, a Mahar sweeper from the state of Maharashtra, he was born into a military family that had served in the British army. His father was relatively educated and was able to convince the local government school to allow his children to attend. Ambedkar proved to be an able student and, despite prejudice against him, was eventually able to gain entry to the University of Bombay. Through successive scholarships, he eventually received a PhD in political science from Columbia University in New York (in 1927) and advanced degrees in economics and

law at the London School of Economics (in the early 1920s), later qualifying as a lawyer in London. He returned to India in the early 1920s, established a law practice, and became a leading social reformer advocating the end of untouchability. In the late 1920s, he organized active protest rallies and marches advocating equal educational access for Untouchables, the abolition of prescribed duties for Mahars (sweepers, the cleaners of latrines and streets), temple entry, and access to public wells. Untouchables were—and continue to be in many places—denied access not only to schools and temples but even to water from the wells used by higher castes. To protest such exclusions, Ambedkar led a nonviolent demonstration at a water reservoir. To assert the rights of Untouchables to draw water from it, he took a drink, which resulted in violence between caste Hindus and Untouchables. Later the reservoir had to be publicly purified by Brahman priests before caste Hindus would use it again (Kadam 1991, 83).[6]

Ambedkar disagreed vehemently with Gandhi's proposal for a religious solution to caste exclusions and pursued direct legal and political action instead. Unlike Gandhi, who idealized an authentic Hinduism devoid of caste ranking, Ambedkar argued that caste had its origins in religion and Brahmanical Hinduism in particular. Religion, therefore, could not be the course for real change. Ambedkar called for the legal abolition of caste, which he saw as "the principle impediment to social justice, equality, and reform" (Dirks 2001, 265). His anti-Brahmanism made it difficult for him to gain wide support, especially when in 1927 he burned sacred Brahmanical texts on caste duties in a public display of protest (Zelliot 1996, 163).

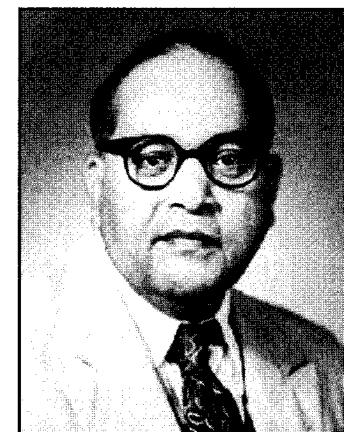


Fig. 5.2: B. R. Ambedkar.

The conflict over untouchability between Gandhi and Ambedkar came to a head in the 1930s as the Indian electorate continued to expand. During the 1930s some regional legislative bodies passed anti-Untouchable measures, measures that would continue separating Untouchables from caste Hindus in much the same way that Jim Crow laws disallowed blacks in many southern U.S. states from attending the same schools as whites or even entering white restaurants or drinking from the same water fountains. Such measures fueled Ambedkar's argument that Untouchables were a legitimate minority and should be granted a separate electorate (Bayly 1999, 256).

In 1932 Untouchables were granted separate voting status, but this did not last long for Gandhi quickly launched a "fast unto death" to protest this move. His fast attracted not only national but international attention. Eleanor Zelliot, a scholar of Untouchable movements, quotes some of Gandhi's fears concerning a separate electorate for Untouchables.

> "[Untouchable leaders] do not realize that the separate electorate will create division among Hindus so much that it will lead to bloodshed. Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and kill caste-Hindus." (Zelliot 1996, 167).

Gandhi went on to suggest that the British knew very well that such divisions would follow and for this very reason they pushed the 1932 legislation calling for a separate Untouchable electorate. To protect Congress's Hindu base, as well as, perhaps, his idealized vision of Hinduism as a socially cooperative system, Gandhi continued his fast until Ambedkar was more or less forced to relent in order to save the life of Gandhi, who was by now an international star and national leader of great charisma and power.

They reached a compromise. The Pune Pact of 1932 resolved to end discrimination against Untouchables in the use of public wells, schools, and roads and also advanced the cause of temple entry. But Ambedkar was disappointed that these albeit very visible measures still failed to address entrenched educational, economic, and employment inequities and further fed into what he considered to be the myth that Hinduism offered the solution to Untouchable rights. In 1935 he converted to Buddhism to mark his total rejection of Hinduism's exclusion of Untouchables, and in 1942 he started his own supercaste political party, the Scheduled Castes Federation (now the BSP) in hopes of uniting Untouchables under this single political banner (Zelliot 1996, 171).

Ambedkar continued his work to bring about the kind of reform he thought necessary, and, while ultimately he needed to give up some of his more radical ideas (Zelliot 1996, 173), as law minister and one of the architects of the Indian Constitution he was able to influence the legal status of Untouchables in post-independence India by helping to write into law the affirmative action type of reservation system in place in India today. While Untouchables did not receive the right to a separate electorate (where they alone would vote for their own candidates), they did receive the right to maintain certain reserved seats for Untouchable candidates (for whom any voter of any caste may cast a ballot) in political and legal bodies, from town councils to state and national legislatures.

CONCLUSION

All of the actors mentioned here worked tirelessly to hammer out the basic constitutional terms of the modern nation of India. They did not abolish caste, but they did write into the Constitution provisions that made discrimination on the basis of caste illegal and reserved seats in legislative assemblies for Scheduled Castes (the governmental designation that many Untouchables prefer even today over any other lumping title such as Untouchable or Harijan) and other relatively "depressed castes" categorized as "Backward" and "Most Backward." These measures guaranteed that caste would remain a part of Indian social organization and contributed to shaping the modern phenomenon of caste in democratic India.

6

UNTOUCHABILITY

What was the condition of life for Untouchables in Gandhi and Ambedkar's time? And what is life like for Untouchables now? In this chapter, we look at a few experiences of Untouchables in India, both fictional and biographical. Before I begin it is worth noting the changing terms used over the last century to designate those I have referred to primarily as Untouchables. *Untouchable* is clearly an English word, the word the British used to refer to outcaste communities considered by so-called caste Hindus to be polluting to touch. We have also seen how S.C., or Scheduled Caste, is the government designation for Untouchable castes all over India. *Harijan* was Gandhi's term, literally "son of god," which was intended to rhetorically include Untouchables within the Hindu fold. Today this term is often rejected as condescending. Activists and many younger Indians from so-called Untouchable communities use the term *Dalit*. *Dalit* means "oppressed," and its use signifies a politics of emancipation from discrimination. This chapter traces, in broad outline, what Eleanor Zelliot characterizes in her book title as the transformation "From Untouchable to Dalit" (1996).

UNTOUCHABLE AND HARIJAN

The novel *Untouchable*, by Ghandhian Mulk Raj Anand, was written in 1935 in the midst of the debates and struggles outlined above. In the novel, Anand portrays one day in the life of an eighteen-year-old Untouchable "sweeper" named Bhaka who suffers innumerable humiliations as his day progresses. Bhaka is not allowed to attend school, though he longs to learn how to read. He sweeps latrines and cleans up other peoples' garbage to eke out a living, but even then he must beg his patrons for food. Because he cannot climb stairs, lest he raise his body above that of higher-caste Hindus, they toss his food down to him, forcing him to pick it off the dirty street. His family consumes the leftovers of others, mushy and partial meals left on banana leaf plates. On this day, in addition to the usual humiliations, Bhaka accidently bumps into a caste Hindu on a crowded street and is publicly abused (he was supposed to

walk along announcing his presence—"Watch out, Untouchable coming!"—for even his polluting shadow must not cross the path of a caste Hindu). He is then yelled at for resting on the outer veranda of a house owner, thereby polluting her house. He is not allowed into the temple whose outer grounds he is required to sweep. He learns that his sister is forced to wait, thirsty and hungry, at a public well for a higher-caste person to give her water and suffers sexual abuse at her benefactor's hands later in the day. Bhaka cowers through the day and is "always ashamed of being seen" (104).

Pollution, Pollution, pollution! It is all he hears; it is how he has been taught to see himself. His only moments of refuge during the day include the kindness of a soldier, who gives him a brand new hockey stick; the friendship of some boys from marginally higher castes who play hockey with him (though they are scolded for doing so); and an odd encounter with a Salvation Army missionary who tries to convince him that Jesus is the answer to his problems. Since the fellow only sings hymns and speaks in English, Bhaka is not convinced. Toward the end of the harsh day, Bhaka is literally running away from his life toward the outskirts of town when he stumbles on a crowd listening to a speech by Gandhi. Bhaka is swept up in the crowd and listens. The speech that the author, Anand, quotes in the novel hits the key points outlined in the previous chapter: the British government wishes to alienate Untouchables from Hinduism by giving them a separate electorate; Hindus are hypocritical to press for freedom from British oppression when they themselves oppress the Untouchables; Untouchability is not sanctioned by religion; religion must therefore reform and accept Untouchables; Untouchables must purify their own habits in order to raise their status; and "all public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the Untouchables" (Anand 1935, 146–49). Bhaka is touched most of all by Gandhi's declared wish that he had been born a sweeper. Sweepers, Gandhi intones, are the noble cleaners of the society. Bhaka turns homeward to resume his work, his shoulders held a bit higher than before.

Anand presents Bhaka through a Gandhian lens as a strong man by nature who has been brought down by centuries of oppression. His novel is an argument not only that Untouchables must lift themselves up and purify their bodies but that caste Hindus should recognize sweeping as a noble pursuit and regard Untouchability as a sin against all Hindus.

Untouchable Experience, Untouchable Action

The humiliations that Bhaka suffers have been commonly reported: lack of access to wells, schools, shops, temples, houses of higher-caste people, and

even some village streets. Even Ambedkar suffered some of these humiliations throughout his life. Consider this article, based on a 1932 *New York Times* interview with Ambedkar, which describes his early school experience.

> At Dapoli in Bombay Presidency, however, there was a government-aided school, and the elder Ambedkar insisted his boys be allowed to attend on the ground that he was an army officer. It was finally arranged that they and four other "Untouchables" might go to the school on the condition that they stay in a room by themselves and never come in contact with the caste children, and above all that they never take a drink from the school water supply. . . . He was then 6 years old.
>
> The Hindu teacher at the school never entered the room in which the outcast children were struggling with their lessons. But occasionally he went to the door, whereupon the six small boys placed their slates on the ground, where he could see them, and then retreated to a far corner to listen to any comment the teacher might have to make. They could ask no questions. If they did not understand the lesson, there was no help from the teacher. . . . [H]e was the only one of the group who got beyond the first school. (Selden 1932).[1]

Like many Untouchables who were able to obtain an education, Ambedkar's biography reads like a great success story. Through sheer determination and intelligence, he was able to overcome the odds and rise to a position of high rank in Indian society. But as James Freeman points out, the vast majority of Untouchables have been born, lived, and died in the midst of discrimination. Freeman's 1979 sketch of the life of an Untouchable man, Muli, recounts something closer to the life experience of many Untouchables who grew up in the twentieth century. Take, for example, Muli's description of his school experience.

> When I was nine years old, Grandfather told me to attend school. He offered to pay the high tuition fees, six annas per month. I don't know where he found the money. The schoolhouse was a mud and thatch hut located next to the village tank [public reservoir]. The villagers never forgot, nor did they let us forget, that we were Untouchables. High-caste children sat inside the school; the Bauri children, about twenty of us, sat outside on the veranda and listened. The two teachers, a Brahman outsider, and a temple servant, refused to touch us, even with a stick. To beat us, they threw bamboo canes. The higher-caste children threw mud at us. Fearing severe beatings, we dared not fight back. (quoted in Freeman 1979, 67).

Needless to say, Muli did not stay in school for long and spent his life as a laborer. As a grown man, even buying a cup of tea at the local tea shop was an experience in humiliation. Muli went to the tea shop, sat on the ground with his own glass (they would not serve an Untouchable with their own), and waited. Freeman describes the scene.

> Above Muli, sitting on the benches in the shop, three men sipped tea. . . . A ten-year-old boy dressed in shorts leisurely filled their glasses while he studiously ignored the silent man outside. . . . After several minutes the boy glanced at Muli; then, in language that deliberately and offensively signaled that he was addressing a social familiar [he insulted Muli,] who pointed to his glass. From a proper distance, Muli dropped two coins in the boy's outstretched palm. . . . [Muli] stood up and shuffled off, crouching to show respect, so that as he passed by the men in the tea shop his right hand trailed in the dust. (3).

In Yanaimangalam, I heard similar stories of exclusion. My older Brahman neighbors sometimes recounted days when Untouchables would not enter their street and that to even cross shadows with an Untouchable was considered defiling. Some people in 2003 still refused to take anything directly from the hand of an Untouchable, and many recalled how even the coins Untouchables used to buy goods had to be splashed with purifying water before shopkeepers would pick them up. Exclusions based on caste are illegal in India, just as racist exclusion is illegal in the United States. In fact, most upper-caste Hindus no longer practice such brazen acts of exclusion. But, like racism in the United States, caste discrimination in India persists. To this day no Untouchable in Yanaimangalam would dare buy a house in the main village settlement among the higher castes, and they remain excluded by some people—not all—from houses and temples.

None of this is to say that Untouchables acquiesce to this life. Throughout the twentieth century and continuing today, Untouchables have expressed their anger, sometimes quietly and covertly by grumbling to their neighbors and sometimes more overtly through public protests such as those staged by Ambedkar. My neighbor Parvathi, for example, recounted the day (in the 1940s or 1950s, she said) when Untouchables marched up the Brahman street for the first time in a protest against their exclusion. Although local S.C., as they prefer to be called, told me that they had never participated in these things themselves, they confirmed that outside organizers had come in and conducted such protests. Today many younger S.C. are more willing to directly protest prejudice. I will relate two incidents that were particularly jarring to S.C. residents during my stays in Yanaimangalam.

Covert and Overt Protests

In 1989, as part of my research into Hindu ritual and politics, I was interviewing a young leader from one of the S.C. hamlets about the origin myth of a deity who resided in a small shrine in the fields just beyond their hamlet (fig. 6.1). The origin myth centered on the murder—said to have happened over one hundred years earlier—of a strong youth from the washerman caste who was acting more like a little king than a humble, low-ranking washerman. I was surprised by the palpable anger with which Hari related the story, especially when he talked about a ruthless and deadly attack that higher-caste villagers and allies had carried out on this mythical youth. It was as if it had happened yesterday. Later on that day I learned that his anger arose not from the mythical events of the long distant past but rather from a more recent incident concerning his own community.

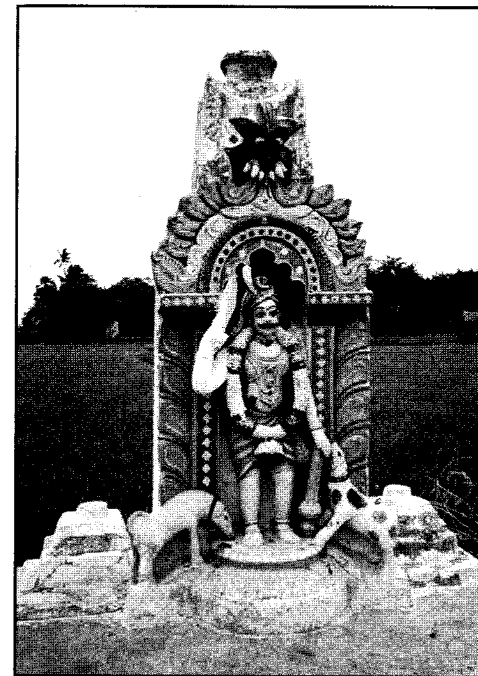


Fig. 6.1: The deity, born out of violence.

That week, a man from his hamlet had entered the village goddess temple to worship the goddess (fig. 6.2). The priest was not there, nor was anyone else. And so he snuck all the way into the temple and pinched a bit of holy ash to smear on his forehead as a mark of the goddess's grace. As he left the temple, with that bright smear of ash on his forehead, he passed the priest and some higher-caste men. No words were spoken at the time, but a couple of days later the police showed up in the S.C. hamlet. Apparently some of the higher-caste leaders of the village had gone to the police and, according to Hari, trumped up a charge that the man with the ash had really gone into the temple to steal a brass bell. During this visit, no arrests were made (most young men, warned of a visit, ran away before the police arrived), but the police issued an oral injunction against S.C. entering the goddess temple. Hari bitterly denounced the injustice (*anyayam*) of the whole affair, and he made a bold claim. He claimed that it was his own *jati* that had the primary, authentic right to

worship the goddess. The higher and more powerful village *jatis*, he claimed, were relative newcomers. The Untouchables had always been there. They were the original inhabitants of India, the "original Dravidians."[2]

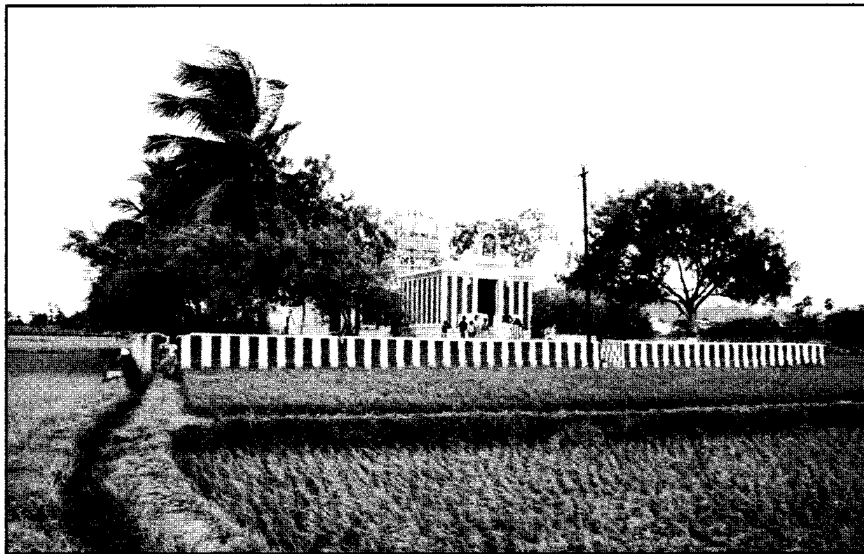


Fig. 6.2: The goddess temple.

Hari's response to these events was passionate but covert. He did not directly confront the higher-caste group, which he blamed for the injustice. Rather, he hid his protest by expressing his anger among those with whom he felt relatively safe. A month later, however, his community expressed its sentiments regarding exclusion more overtly. The Dalits held a festival for one of their own deities, and they hung posters of Ambedkar on their shrine as a message to the whole village that they believed in his message about achieving political solutions to discrimination. They also extended the reach of their shrine across the only road leading in and out of the village, hence routing all passersby—even those riding the bus—from whatever caste, under a temple in which they held power (fig. 6.3).

The second incident I wish to outline occurred in 2003. Aruna, my research associate in Yanaimangalam, related the story to me. In the fall of that year, two youths from the village—one from the dominant Thevar caste and one an Untouchable youth—were involved in a fight that broke out in their college cafeteria some twenty miles away and to which they both commuted daily by ramshackle bus. The fight broke out when the Thevar youth and his associates walked into the cafeteria and complained out loud to the manager that "Untouchables" should be provided with separate plates

and cups. The implication was, of course, that the higher-caste youths should not have to be exposed to any Untouchable impurities that might be transferred to the crockery. Unable to bear this insult, which hearkened back to the worst days of open discrimination, the Untouchable youths shouted back. A fight ensued, during the course of which the Thevar youth threatened, "I'll kill you."

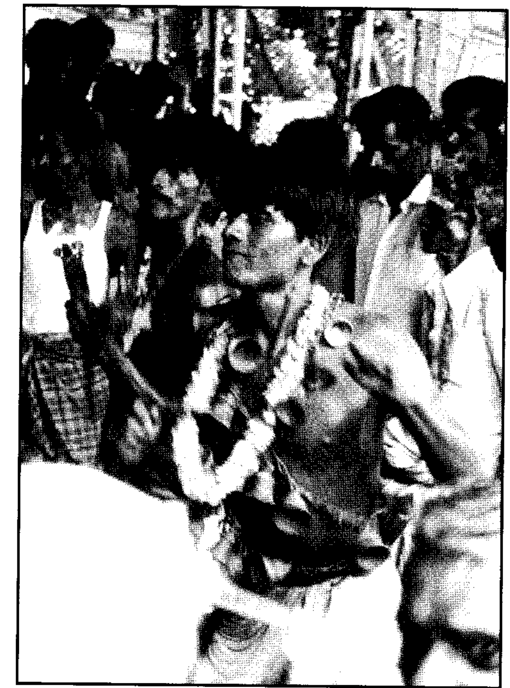


Fig. 6.3: A young S.C. man dances while possessed by a powerful deity, 1990.

But, as Aruna tells it, it was the Thevar youth who was found murdered a few days later at the edge of the outermost village boundary behind a small Hindu shrine to a guardian deity.

Violence does occur. In many parts of India, certain communities—often dominant farming castes that have depended for generations on cheap Untouchable labor accompanied by obeisance—do engage in violent struggles with Dalit communities that no longer passively endure discrimination and increasingly, when possible, turn to wage labor in favor of the "mutuality" of village agricultural exchange arrangements, which often implicate them in a kind of servitude. But most people reject violence and work for social change through peaceful means. Common strategies for S.C. families include educating their children to prepare them for better jobs or, for some, migrating to towns and cities for labor where, as more than one person told me, caste differences don't matter as much. The city holds out the hope of more egalitarian modes of life, though the fact that vast urban slums are occupied mostly by S.C. suggests that the hope is not always easily fulfilled.

Generation Gaps

While Untouchables for many years have supported egalitarian policies, some among the younger generation express frustration at what they see as the older

generation's relatively passive acceptance of slow reform. Elders lovingly hang portraits of Ambedkar in their houses, and they do step farther and farther into public spaces as long as they are welcomed. But some among the younger generation are more open in their protests and, as we have seen, even militant in their struggle for equal rights. This passage from the life story of Viramma, an elder Untouchable woman in South India, expresses this generation gap.

> It's good people want us to be raised up, but it's better if we stay in our place. That's what I'm always saying to my son, but he doesn't want to hear any of it. He thinks I'm wrong and says, "Who is this miserable God who made us [Untouchables]? . . . Why did he do that, that bloody God: them rich and us poor?" My answer is . . . "Don't talk like that! Be humble and polite. Don't throw away the people who employ us. Honor them instead, that will do us much more good." (Viramma, Racine, and Racine 1997, 191).

Her son overhears this conversation and provides an economic explanation for caste.

> The truth is that people from the village don't want us to rise up and be educated like them. Why? Because if we manage to own a bit of land . . . then they won't be respected [by us] anymore, they won't find manual labor at a cheap price, they'll have no more serfs. That's what they're afraid of! That's why they insist on the old rules: I should always be half naked in front of them, I should speak to them with my arms crossed, I shouldn't wear my [waist cloth] hanging down to the ground, I shouldn't walk in front of them or dress like them! (192).

Isabelle Clark-Deces recorded a similar analysis by another young Dalit man of the Paraiyar caste, an Untouchable caste associated with the inauspicious and impure labor of death, who told her:

> The name Paraiyan means one who beats the drum, carries the funeral bier, sings death songs, and obeys his master; but we don't like this name anymore. We don't want to beat the drums, nor do we want to work at funerals in exchange for "mouth rice" [raw rice offered to the deceased]. Nowadays, we tell the mourning family, "Dump the rice in the river or take it home; we don't want it." We are equal to the other castes, we deserve better than the food of the dead. . . . When my father sings at a funeral, people say "He is just a Paraiyan!" I don't like people to think that we are cheap. I hate death songs. My father should not sing them. I go to college. People should respect me. How can my friends respect me if my father sings and dances at funerals? (Clark-Deces 2005, 166).

Another, twenty-eight-year-old man Clark-Deces interviewed said, "We have been oppressed for a long time. We have worked very hard in the sun and in the rain, while others stay in the shade. If we start to act violently, what will they [caste Hindus] do? Now they are afraid of us; now we are all educated" (165–66).



Fig. 6.4: Statue of Ambedkar "in jail" to protect it from vandals, Tirunelveli Junction, 2003. (©Richard Rapfogel, used with permission.)

For the younger generations, *Untouchability* is no longer an identifying term. They use *Dalit* (the Oppressed). Many upper-caste people accept and are resigned to these changes. As one village headman said, "In the old days Dalits did what was demanded of them. Now they are educated and no longer want to do the work. We cannot stop them from growing up and seeking better jobs. Of course we feel bad that our culture is dying, but the Dalits don't." (Clark-Deces 2005, 167). Others persist in asserting forms of dominance and discrimination such as the insults in the cafeteria noted above or the desecration of Dalit symbols such as statues of Ambedkar (fig. 6.4). With dominance and discrimination on one side and energetic rejection of discrimination on the other, caste violence between Untouchables and other Hindu communities does break out, and many find themselves involved in regional caste wars that result in deaths on both sides.

7

Some Other Things to Know about Caste

Caste in India impacts many aspects of life for many people, and we have yet to exhaust the possibilities. In order to point to some of the complexities and some of the changes in how Indians talk about and enact caste in their lives, it is worth briefly discussing three additional ways that caste matters in India today. These areas include how and if caste reckonings operate among non-Hindus, how caste impacts marriage choices and practices, and how Indians today debate the reservation or quota system.

Caste and Other Religions

India's majority population is Hindu (although it is worth noting that Hinduism is highly variable). Caste is often regarded as a social structure arising from Hindu practices and ideas. But do other religious groups in India also make caste distinctions? The answer, with some qualifications, is yes. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains have historically recognized and reinforced caste and/or *varna* distinctions.

For example, both Jainism and Buddhism, which developed respectively in the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, arose partly in response to exclusionary aspects of Brahmanical Hinduism. During that period, Brahmans dominated religious action to the exclusion of other *varnas* and *jatis*. These other religious movements argued that salvation can be attained by anyone regardless of *varna* or caste. Right action was what mattered, not right caste. Yet, among both Buddhists and Jains, caste distinctions did have and continue to have relevance. Jains today, for example, will marry only within their own caste, they organize their temples and religious institutions around caste, and they recognize caste rankings that, as Lawrence Babb (2006) writes, both mirror and overlap local Hindu caste distinctions. Many Jains actually consider themselves to be Hindu and of the Vaisya *varna*.[1] Buddhism, which declined in India around the twelfth century CE only to enjoy a small nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival, also has some association with caste, though

differently then than now. Since its more recent revival, Buddhism has built a reputation of repudiating caste. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as an egalitarian alternative to Hinduism and publicly converted shortly before his death. Since then, many Dalits have also converted to Buddhism. But was Buddhism really egalitarian from the beginning? Scholars debate this point, some pointing out early statements of the Buddha that deny that *varna* or caste has any relevance for ultimate ends (liberation, nirvana). Others, however, point out that the Buddhist elite belonged to the top three *varnas* and there is no evidence that Buddhism was in any way a refuge for lower castes. It is perhaps worth noting that caste distinctions persist among both Sri Lankan and Tibetan Buddhists today.

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the first of its ten gurus. While some scholars describe Sikhism as a syncretic blend of Islam and Hinduism, Sikhs usually see their religion as unique and definable in its own terms. One prominent Sikh text states that "a Sikh should have no belief in caste" (Takhar 2005, 27), yet, as both Takhar and McLeod (1989) show, in everyday life most Sikhs do in fact take caste into account. They, too, tend to marry within their own caste, organize some of their religious institutions according to caste, and, especially in rural areas, utilize the kinds of farmer-dependent service caste relations that we have seen at work throughout India.

Indian Christians, too, often continue to recognize caste distinctions by marrying within their caste, organizing institutions by caste, and recognizing among themselves ranked distinctions of caste. But Christianity has also, like the others, held out the hope of a more egalitarian ethos and has historically attracted converts from among the lowest castes. Eliza Kent shows that even higher-caste converts to Christianity in the nineteenth century were considered by Hindus to have lowered their caste status precisely because their conversion signaled contact with lower-caste converts (2004,44–45). C. J. Fuller's work on Christians in Kerala (1976), a state in South India that has a large population of Christians, shows that they divide themselves into three groups that operate like castes. Syrian Christians are the highest caste. They trace their descent to Brahmans who are said in somewhat mythologized accounts to have converted as early as the first millennium CE. Historical evidence certainly supports the existence of a flourishing Christian community at least by the sixth century. Latin Christians (Roman Catholics) are middle ranking and comprise mostly fisher castes from the coastal areas who converted when Jesuits (Saint Francis Xavier in particular) arrived in Kerala in the sixteenth century. Finally, New Christians are those who converted in the colonial era and more recently. They are Protestants who come mostly from the lowest castes, especially Dalits.

These three groups recognize caste affiliations, affiliations they share with local Hindus, and they generally marry within their own caste. As Fuller puts it, "the Christians and Hindus are members of one total caste system, not two separate ones existing side-by-side" (1976, 58).

Caste in Islam turns out to be a more complex issue, one with perhaps a great deal of regional and historical variation. Some evidence suggests that caste, or at least castelike distinctions, do operate among Muslims, and that Muslims are incorporated into local Hindu caste rankings. Raymond Jamous, for example, reports that the Muslim Meos of Rajasthan see themselves as Ksatrya Rajputs and so as high caste. As dominant landowners they are also regarded locally as patrons in both economic and ritual relations with service castes (1997, 181–83). Many Indian Muslims make a caste-related distinction between those who trace their descent to the Arabian Peninsula (Ashraf) and those who are thought to be later converts (Ajlaf), with some also distinguishing those who are members of the Untouchable castes. Frank S. Fanselow (1997) describes similar distinctions among South Indian Muslims and finds that the more elite groups tend to elaborate caste differences more than the less elite groups, which tend to deny the relevance of caste in Islam. Sylvia Vatuk (1997, 227) reports that many of these Muslim subgroups are castelike in some of their practices. For example, they practice endogamy, that is, they insist on marriages taking place within their own group, which is a common feature of caste. Yet she, with others such as Mattison Mines (1972), note that while Muslims do make status distinctions they may not be exactly like those of caste and need to be researched on their own terms. Today many Muslims do not accept caste rankings and increasingly work to set themselves apart from Hinduism by denying caste (Fuller 1997, 21–22).

Like the other religions noted here, Islam holds out the promise of equality through conversion, and as a result it has attracted many Dalits. Because of this, many Indians see some Muslims (especially the lower-ranking Ajlaf converts and their descendants) to be low caste, as they also regard new Buddhists and many Protestant Christians. In some cases, conversions are even considered acts of rebellion—not really religious but politically motivated—and have resulted in communal caste violence.[2] For example, occasionally one reads in the newspapers about an incident in which "Hindus" have killed some "Christians" in India. Often, though, the motivation is not primarily religious but involves landowning castes and Untouchable laborers who are rebelling against oppressive social conditions. Their conversion is but one sign of that rebellion.

MARRIAGE AND CASTE

Discourse on caste today does indeed seem to be couched more and more in regional and national political and economic terms. But caste remains an issue in more intimate affairs as well. Marriage is one place where caste matters in personal life decisions. Indians who recognize caste distinctions usually insist on caste endogamy (marrying within one's caste). While intercaste and interreligious marriages do take place, they often lead to family rifts and in extreme cases even violence.

Caste endogamy was promoted in old Hindu law books, such as the *Laws of Manu*, which directed people to marry within *varna* and *jati*. Some texts also allowed "hypergamy," in which a man of higher rank could marry a woman of lower rank for the marriage ceremonies would help transform her into an appropriate spouse.[3] Inappropriately mixed marriages were thought to jeopardize or confuse social orders; to produce offspring of different, and in some cases very low, caste (Elder 2008, 355); and to reduce the capacity of families to achieve prosperity and well-being (Inden 1976, 98). Indians now tend to stress the importance of biomoral compatibility, that is, the compatibility of biological and moral qualities combined that is thought to exist within but not between castes.

Caste endogamy is ensured in part by arranged marriages, in which the parents of bride and groom make the match. Even in urban families that would perhaps eschew caste rankings as discriminatory, arranged marriages within one's own caste are still the norm (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, 737; Kolenda 2003, 398–99). An arranged marriage does not mean a loveless marriage. In these marriages love is said to grow over time. As Sarah Lamb writes, even though parents most often arrange the marriage, "the young person will usually face the event with, along with some trepidation, a degree of eager anticipation and romantic expectation, having perhaps met the future spouse on one or two occasions, or at least seen and admired a photo" (2002, 8).

An article by C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2008) on marriage practices in a South Indian Brahman community details how the process of arranging a marriage has changed in recent years. In the old days—ten or twenty years ago—parents, grandparents, and other family members sought marriage alliances that would enhance the status of the families involved. What mattered most in marriage was not the preferences or tastes of bride or groom—they had little or no say—but rather the value of the match for family status interests based on wealth, land, community reputation, or business alliances. Parents and elders would solicit potential alliances through word-of-mouth or, in more recent decades, by classified newspaper (and now Internet) advertisements.

Today young people in India—rural and urban—debate the relative merits of having an arranged marriage or a "love" marriage, one based on romantic attachment. But Fuller and Narasimhan note that the opposition between love and arranged marriages may be overdrawn. They coined the phrase "arranged, endogamous companionate marriage" to refer to marriages that families arrange while taking special care to consider couple preferences and the likelihood of the couples finding close, loving companionship. This kind of arranged marriage is common now among the "new middle classes," and I have also seen this at work, though more rarely, in rural areas among farmers. It also can be found among poor urban dwellers who wish to raise their class status (Dickey 2002). The new middle class, which has boomed in India since the 1990s, is not composed of those whose wealth comes from land or ancestral mercantile activities associated with Vaisya and merchant castes but rather of those with professional white-collar jobs in such fields as Internet technology, computers, business, engineering, medicine, and law. Those who have studied or worked overseas are also considered desirable, as you can see from the ads reproduced below. Those whose status derives from rural agricultural economies are now much less desirable to modern youths and their families (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, 745).

In order to accommodate the interest in companionable couples, arranged marriage practices have changed. Now couples participate in choosing potential partners. They might spend some time getting to know each other by phone or e-mail, and even date a few times, before agreeing to a match.

With all these changes, however, it is still the norm for marriages to be arranged within one's caste. However, the boundaries of endogamy are expanding. In Fuller and Narasimhan's research, for example, members of the community they studied still prefer to marry within their own Brahman caste, but they no longer restrict matches to a narrow subcaste, as they did previously. The fourth ad reproduced below was placed by a Brahman family that will accept almost any other Brahman regardless of subcaste. This expansion of endogamous caste boundaries is especially observable in diasporic communities, for example, among Indian Americans whose parents may still get involved in arranging marriages. As one undergraduate student of Indian parentage told me, his parents would prefer he marry within his caste, but if not then at least within his language group or religion, and, "well, at least marry an Indian!"

The following ads were placed by middle-class families in *The Hindu*, a leading Indian national newspaper, on March 8, 2009. They reflect both the practice of arranging endogamous marriage—including the expanding

boundaries of endogamy and in one case doing away with caste preference altogether ("caste no bar")—and the new stress on education, employment, and overseas experience.

> Saiva Vellala, 30/188, Bharani, BE, MS, on H1 working for a leading US firm as SWE, drawing 72000 PA, invites proposals from Saiva Vellala/Saiva Mudaliar/Saiva Chettiar brides who are Engineers, Doctors, Professionals and PhDs. Send details of time, place and date of birth to the E-mail address . . .

> PHD ASST Professor, 1973/180cm, USA Green card Tamil Pillai seeks bride. Caste/Language no bar. Email . . .

> Mudaliyar Parents settled in Australia seek suitable groom for their daughter, 28/165, B.Com, CA, employed. Prefer Mudaliyar boy in Professional career working Overseas. Email . . .

> WANTED PROF. qlfd wellplaced Iyer/Iyengar/any S. Indian Brahman or Delhi based N. Indian Brahman for Iyer Vadama Bharni 30/168 fair B'ful B.Com.(H) MBA MNC. Email . . .

> SEEKING WELL ESTABLISHED Bengali Kayastha groom below 36yrs working in Vizag, HYD, Kerala, Bangalore and Goa for Bengali Kayastha Homely girl 31/150 Graduate convent educated settled in vizag. Divorcees Please Excuse. Phone . . .

The Mandal Commission and Reservations

In 1989 the issue of India's reservation system exploded politically when the government of Prime Minister V. P. Singh implemented the 1980 recommendations of the Mandal Commission, a constitutionally mandated panel assigned by the government to review constitutional provisions for reservations. As Lukose (2006, 56) reports, the commission recommended that almost 50 percent of educational seats and government jobs be set aside for members of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes.

When V. P. Singh implemented these recommendations, protests broke out all over India, especially in the north, leading to "unprecedented levels of caste polarization for and against reservation" (Pankaj 2007, 341). Protesters blocked roads, marched in processions, closed businesses, and clashed with opponents. One dramatic protest mode that caught the media's attention was self-immolation, as several Forward Caste students doused themselves with gasoline and set themselves on fire. With as much as 50 percent of university

positions and government jobs reserved for others, those designated as Forward saw their chances for success shrink.

The controversy over expanding caste-based reservations points to a critical contemporary debate in Indian society. Many Indians debate the legitimacy of reservation systems for some of the same reasons that opponents of affirmative action in the United States also cite: that affirmative action programs ought to be based on economic rather than caste status (or in the United States race) or that affirmative action only succeeds in creating a more permanent social underclass, whose members rise by means of identity rather than achievement and so are ironically condemned to doubt their own achievements and also be doubted by others, who as a consequence sustain a view of minorities (whether caste or race) as a separate class of disadvantaged citizens rather than fully integrated members of society. Others argue, of course, that caste inequities have resulted in real disadvantages for many Indian citizens and affirmative action programs are necessary to provide opportunities where otherwise prejudice would exclude them. This issue is argued with vigor, passion, anger, hope, and even despair and is one of the most powerful social and political debates in India today. Indians are asking themselves whether caste still a relevant social reality and, if so, how and to what extent.[4]

CONCLUSION

What is caste? To sum up I will begin by reminding us of what it is not: it is not a coherent system that exists all over India and by which all Indians abide. It is not a set of precut categories into which people place themselves like rungs on an immovable ladder. Nor is it an "ancient tradition" set beside more modern realities. Rather, caste is a changing constellation of values, actions, ideas, and organizing principles that most Indians engage with in one way or another in their daily lives. Caste is a product of complex histories and exists today in multiple forms.

Not all people view, enact, or value caste the same way. This booklet has attempted to encapsulate some of the more pervasive and common aspects of caste as they pertain to the daily lives of many Indians, especially but not at all exclusively of those whose families are considered Hindu. The aspects of caste we have explored here include the following:

(1) For many rural Indians in agriculturally rich areas, caste is a mode of labor organization. Persons with hereditary rights to perform certain prescribed jobs exchange their services for grain in exchanges that may be characterized as mutually beneficial and reciprocal.

(2) Some of these same persons also engage in exchanges with landowners that carry with them something more than economic value. Those born to some service castes, such as Brahman priests, washerman, and barbers are thought to be appropriate recipients for the negative karma, the sins or evils and other faults, that are thought to "stick" to actors and prevent their success in social life. By taking on the evils of others, service caste members participate in a long-standing Hindu practice of remaking the moral center of society. At the same time, however, they re-create for themselves a position on the periphery of that moral center, one that sometimes leaves them stigmatized as the bearers of sin. Because of this stigma, many persons avoid engaging in these kinds of exchanges.

(3) We have seen that caste has been, and continues to be for many,

a way of understanding what makes people the way they are and what makes them different. According to some Hindu beliefs, different qualities of substance cause people to have different natures, different potentials for action, and different moral configurations. Combined with a view of persons as "dividuals" capable of sharing qualities with one another through touching and other kinds of exchanges of substances, this aspect of caste accentuates ranked relations between different castes. At the bottom of this ranking, of course, have been the Untouchables, whose impurities are thought to have negative effects on others such that they are disallowed from eating off the same plates or residing in the same neighborhoods as higher-caste people.

(4) Today probably one of the most visible and powerful aspects of caste is the way in which it operates as a symbol of collective identity and a basis for political organization. We have seen that these aspects of caste arose in direct relation to British colonial, as well as Indian nationalist, ideas and actions. These political aims often create new alliances of identity between subcastes and castes previously thought to be separate such as the "supercastes" discussed in chapter 4. These supercastes are large conglomerations of castes whose members construct shared historical identities in order to unite as political constituencies in democratic practice.

For some Indians, each and every one of these aspects of caste is relevant in their daily lives. For others, only some matter. And for many Indian citizens caste may take a backseat to other, more burning questions of economic class, youth culture and style, consumption of modern goods, migration abroad, or education in new fields such as Internet technology. For others, especially, perhaps, those Dalits (Untouchables) who still reside in areas where caste matters a great deal for local social and political organization, it seems that caste colors almost all of their experience.

Caste as a Human Phenomenon

I began this booklet with a warning against thinking of India only in terms of caste and of thinking of caste only in terms of India. To conclude, let me elaborate briefly on what I mean by that. All societies in the world today exhibit inequalities and injustice. In India this is certainly the case. Even as I write this booklet, a relevant example has appeared in the news. Areas of northeastern India have been inundated by massive flooding brought on by

excessive monsoon rains. According to an article filed by the Associated Press on September 1, 2008, as many as 1.2 million people were driven from their homes and many had been waiting for days to obtain food aid and rescue from islanded bits of land rising here and there amid the floodwaters. According to this report, Dalits were the last to be rescued, having been forced to wait while higher-caste people filled the rescue boats (a copy of the report can be viewed at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26498436).

How shall we read that news? As proof of India's ancient ways and discrimination against Untouchables? As a way to distance ourselves from them, to see Indians as others who have completely different ideas of society? What first came to mind as I read this article were images of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, where those at the bottom of the social ladder of race and class were also left waiting too long, without food or water, without rescue.

Caste certainly does produce social inequalities, and while other societies do not have caste we all have social inequalities that are pervasive, structural, and tied to cultural ideas about qualities of persons, moral action, and social differentiation. If you attend an American high school, you understand this well. Who is in and who is out, who is high and who is low, who fits in and who does not—for many people, these distinctions are riveting calls to form exciting cliques of friends; for others, they are simply disastrous.

Although our lives are shot through with inequalities, many of us in the middle or on top do not even think about it, at least not often. We do not always feel our society's ranking system unless we're the ones left at the bottom without a boat, with no food on the table, no place to move freely.

Caste is one multifaceted aspect of modern life in India. It includes inequalities and injustices that pain many of its citizens and affect them all. But rather than reading this booklet as a text only about other people in other places distant in all ways from ourselves, perhaps we can also use it to reflect on and look more closely at the inequities, prejudices, and social distinctions that we all help make and remake in our daily lives.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

[1] M. N. Srinivas (2003), among others, has noted that intercaste service relations are diminishing in many areas.

[2] Pamela Price (1996) has argued that village landlords have more power to control local resources, including people, than they did before Indian independence. Their increasing local influence stems in part from constitutional laws that give village councils considerable power over the allocation of resources.

CHAPTER TWO

[1] Sarah Lamb (2000, 63) finds that these dimensions of social distinction also operate within the Indian family.

[2] In 1976, Ron Inden wrote that it was incorrect to argue, as others had, that Hindu people based rank on biology while in the West people based rank on law. He used the term *biomoral* to indicate that Indians did not dichotomize biology and law but rather viewed the two as interdependent aspects of human beings (1976, 11–12). McKim Marriott's body of work stresses this biomorality of caste, and the term is now a common shorthand that designates the intertwining of the biological and the moral in Indian ways of thinking about the person.

[3] Wadley and Derr (1990) also show that villagers see their own moral condition to have consequences for the well-being of the village as a whole. When a devastating fire destroyed many houses and killed several people in the landowner section of the village they worked in, villagers were quick to blame the sins (*pap*) of the landowners in the village for the devastation.

[4] Others report similar findings for both South India (Brubaker 1979; Good 1991; Inglis 1985; Kapadia 1995) and North India (Parry 1989; Sax 1991; Wadley and Derr 1990).

[5] David Shulman cites myths in which the famous sin-destroying Ganges River is forced on occasion to visit a south Indian temple powerful enough to take on even all that sacred river's sins (1980, 18).

[6] See Parry 1986, Raheja 1988b and, for an expanded summary of the argument, Mines 2008.

[7] Dube (1998) and Ludden (1993) have shown that in the days when there was still a somewhat open frontier of unsettled and unclaimed land in India lower castes who felt mistreated could simply migrate to new territory and resettle as farmers on their own terms.

CHAPTER THREE

[1] For an accessible translation see Miller 1986.

[2] Marriott (1968) established a model for determining rank that included food exchange data. Many others also used this method (e.g., Freed 1970; and Davis 1983, 74–78). Food exchanges were not the only indicators of rank order. Other observable expressions of rank included seating orders during feasts (Beck 1972, 157–62) and even pronoun use (Levinson 1982).

[3] See, for example, the essays in Marriott 1990.

[4] For different views comparing caste and race, see Berreman 1960; and Gupta 2000, 86–105.

CHAPTER FOUR

[1] Rachel Tolen (1991) shows how British ideas of social class, body, and morality in England formed a cultural model for understanding caste in India.

[2] Modern genetics tells us that while race and ethnicity may be significant social categories they are not significant genetic categories. The genetic variation *between* what we call races is less than the genetic variation that exists *within* what we call races.

[3] Tolen (1991), Dirks (2001), and Clare Anderson (2004) discuss in depth British definitions of criminality in India.

CHAPTER FIVE

[1] Much of this chapter draws on my reading of Metcalf and Metcalf 2006, Bayly 1999, and Zelliot 1996.

[2] Muslims in India were worried that, as a minority community somewhat disparaged by many Hindus, they would never be able to achieve adequate political representation without the kind of reservation system outlined here. This concern was one reason for the political decision to create two nations after independence, India and Pakistan, the latter intended as a homeland for South Asian Muslims.

[3] Probably it is no coincidence that Wiser wrote about this idea of caste at the very same time that Gandhi was defining it in similar terms for nationalist purposes.

[4] During visits to Yanaimangalam in 1989 and 2003, local government officials hosted an "all-caste lunch" in the village's Visnu temple. Both times Dalit residents implied that they dared not attend and claimed that the officials would bring in Dalits from outside the village for show.

[5] Some of this biographical information on Ambedkar was gathered by Francis Pritchett and can be found at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline (accessed September 2009). Students can see how contemporary followers of Ambedkar present their story at www.ambedkar.org (accessed May 30, 2009). See also Zelliot 1996 for a scholarly account of the Ambedkar movement.

[6] See http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline (accessed December 2008).

CHAPTER SIX

[1] The article can be found at www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/1890.html (accessed December 2008).

[2] *Original Dravidians* is a term coined in the 1920s by a Tamil political leader, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker. Used in this context, the term implies that Dalits are the original inhabitants of India; all others are foreign intruders.

CHAPTER SEVEN

[1] On caste among Jains, see also Cort 2004 and 2001, 57–60.

[2] One well-known example is the much publicized case of Meenakshipuram in which an entire hamlet of Dalits converted to Islam en masse.

[3] Hypergamy is practiced in parts of India still. As Inden (1976) explains, men are able to marry lower-ranked women in part because it is thought that women are mere vessels for child-producing semen and the progeny will be of the father's higher caste.

[4] See the Indian journal *Seminar*, issue 549 (2005) for a vigorous debate of Indian views on reservations today, available at www.india-seminar.com/semsearch.htm (accessed on March 15, 2009). See also Pankaj 2007.

RECOMMENDED READING

ON CASTE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LIFE

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Wadley, Susan S. 1994. *Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925–1984*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ON CASTE AND GENDER

Bardan, Kalpana. 1990. *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kapadia, Karin. 1995. *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India*. Boulder: Westview.

Sax, William. 1991. *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*. New York: Oxford University Press.

ON THE EXPERIENCE OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Caste at Birth, dir. Mira Hamermersh, 1990.

Jadhav, Narendra. 2007. *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Escape from India's Caste System*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Gandhi dir. Richard Attenborough, 1982.

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Bayly, Susan. 1999. *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Dirks, Nicholas. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tolen, Rachel. 1991. Colonizing and Transforming the Criminal Tribesman: The Salvation Army in British India. *American Ethnologist* 18(1): 106–25.

General Indian History and Social Life

Metcalf, Barbara D., and Thomas R. Metcalf. 2006. *A Concise History of Modern India*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Glossary

Biomoral. A term widely used by scholars of Hinduism to depict the complex, dual nature of actions, events, and persons. It indicates that biological realities and moral codes are understood to be inextricably entangled; persons' actions (meritorious or sinful, for example) affect their biological nature (sins stick to the body and change it), and likewise their biological natures (as defined by caste, birth, the *gunas*, and so on) affect their actions. There is no single set of moral commandments in Hinduism (no Ten Commandments that apply to everyone). Rather, different castes or *varnas* are expected to manifest somewhat different moralities according to their physical natures (Brahmans must not kill, but Ksatriyas—warriors and kings—sometimes must). In contemporary Indian legal systems, however, biology and morality are separated, just as they are in the United States. The law is (ideally) applied to all equally, regardless of cultural concepts of biology.

Brahman. A member of the caste generally agreed among Hindus all over India to be the "highest" in terms of rank. This high rank is based not on wealth but on purity. There are many subcastes of Brahmans; some, but by no means all, serve as temple priests. See also *Varna*.

Centrality. An aspect of intercaste relations identified by Gloria Raheja in which "central" castes—the dominant, landowning, agricultural castes—send their inauspiciousness (including sins, the evil eye, and other faults) to structurally "peripheral" service castes such as barbers, washermen, and Brahmans.

Dalit. A contemporary, political term used to refer to those formerly known as Untouchables. The term means "the oppressed" and signals allegiance to political movements that fight for the equality of these groups in Indian society. Many young people among the formerly Untouchable castes self-identify as Dalit. The Dalit movement is modeled in part on the Black Panther movement in U.S. history.

Dan. A Sanskrit term used widely in contemporary Indian languages to refer to the customary payments or gifts through which persons transfer their inauspiciousness to other persons or places. See also *Centrality*.

Endogamy. The practice of marrying within a certain group. Castes are considered endogamous because persons tend to marry within their own caste. In the United States, statistics show that Americans tend to practice endogamy based on class and race, though this preference is loosening somewhat.

Guna. Literally "quality," *guna* refers to each of three embodied qualities that characterize different elements of the phenomenal universe, including humans and castes. These qualities are *sattva* (goodness and light), *rajas* (passion and action), and *tamas* (darkness and inertia).

Harijan. Meaning "child of god," this was Mahatma Gandhi's term for Untouchables. Many Untouchables now reject that term as condescending and prefer either *S.C.* or *Dalit.*

Jajmani relations. An arrangement of rural, intercaste exchanges in which dominant landowning groups engage in regular exchanges with occupational service castes such as barbers, carpenters, and Brahman priests. Sometimes this arrangement is called the *jajmani* system, but some scholars have challenged the "systematicity" of these relations, noting that they vary from place to place and throughout history.

Jati. A pan-Indian term meaning "birth group" or "genus," this is the common word Indians use to refer to caste. There are thousands of *jatis* in India, and they vary from region to region.

Ksatriya. Nobles and kings; this is the second highest ranked group among the four *varnas.*

Mutuality. A term coined by William Wiser to describe the reciprocal exchanges between landowners and occupational service castes (carpenters, barbers, etc.), which have the hereditary right to perform certain kinds of work or service. The landowners give grain in return for this service.

S.C., Scheduled Caste. The governmental term, first used by the British and now by the government of India, to designate those otherwise known as Untouchables.

Subcaste. Most castes may be divided into subgroups that see each other as different or separate in some ways due to historical or mythological events or simply due to separate habits, actions, and places of extended occupation. Traditionally, members of subcastes have not intermarried, but they might do so more frequently now.

Sudra. Servants or laborers, this is the lowest ranking among the four *varnas.*

Thevar. One of the politically dominant, landowning castes found throughout much of Tamilnadu in South India. The British considered the Thevars a "criminal caste." Today Thevars constitute a "supercaste," having combined previously separate subcastes into a large political constituency active in democratic elections.

Untouchable. An English term used to refer to outcastes in South Asia, that is, to those who are considered impure and outside properly human caste groups. See also *Dalit, Harijan,* and *S.C.*

Vaisya. Commoners who take care of land and business, this is the third-ranked group among the four *varnas.*

Varna. A Sanskrit term referring to the four ranked categories of human beings: Brahmans (priests and religious scholars), Ksatriyas (nobles, warriors, and rulers), Vaisyas (those engaged in commerce including the land business), and Sudras (servants and laborers). Some people in India use these terms to classify their caste into larger groupings.

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